The INDEPENDENT

SATURDAY 8 AUGUST 2026 WWW.INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

BRITAIN HAS AN OCTOPUS PROBLEM – IS EATING THEM THE ANSWER?

Charlotte Cripps I wanted to escape the heatwave. As we passed Preston, I realised my terrible mistake

Serial sex offender was free to kill two women because of police blunders

Simon Levy murdered Carmenza Valencia-Trujillo (top) and Sheryl Wilkins (above) despite earlier convictions

EXCLUSIVE

Abandoned: the Afghans put at risk from Taliban – but Britain won't help

Thousands promised sanctuary after helping British forces face retribution and door-to-door searches but now UK won't resettle them – even after data breach put more in danger

Britain's debt to those Afghans who fought alongside our forces is due

As a matter of national honour, the British government must stop dragging its feet in protecting those who served alongside our troops in Afghanistan. As we report today, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has admitted in an internal review that Afghans who worked with British forces are still likely to be at risk from Taliban retribution.

Despite this admission, in June last year the government stopped evacuating families who had already been approved for sanctuary in Britain. Luke Pollard, the defence minister, announced in April this year that Afghan families eligible for relocation would have to flee the Taliban-run country on their own.

He told the Commons in a written statement that the thousands of Afghans still waiting would "need to make their own way to a third country when they are able to do so".

The Independent can now reveal that a review carried out by the MoD in February concluded that "the risk to individuals who may be eligible … remains real, albeit diminished".

The review tried to minimise the dangers to Afghans who served with or worked for British forces during the 20 years that

Western troops occupied the country before the Taliban regained control in 2021. It described the threat as "selective and localised" and that recent attacks, including killings, of Afghans "may well be the result of recent transgressions, rather than their previous affiliation" to the UK government.

These excuses are beside the point. The British government made a solemn promise to those Afghans who worked with the British that they would be protected. Many thousands of them have been given sanctuary in Britain, but there remain about 7,000 who the MoD accepts are in danger and are therefore eligible for resettlement, but who are still in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries, mainly Pakistan and Iran.

This number is higher than it would have been because of the catastrophic data breach in 2022, when the MoD accidentally sent out a list of Afghans who had worked with the British by insecure email. This was an error for which the British government has to take responsibility, and yet too much of the response to it involved obfuscation and delay.

We are concerned that this approach, to make it difficult and slow to make it to safety, is typical of the British state's attitude to its obligations to Afghans generally. We are proud to have played a role in the Home Office's decision in 2023 to grant indefinite leave to remain for the Afghan pilot who was threatened with deportation to Rwanda.

But throughout *The Independent*'s long campaign to hold the government to account for its promises, we have suspected that the unspoken view among ministers and officials is that obstruction and delay are an effective way of discouraging applicants.

This is unacceptable. We understand that immigration is a sensitive political subject, and we share the public's dismay at the previous government losing control of the system, allowing

too many work visas and dependants. But the Afghan situation is specific, limited and a question of principle. Public opinion supports the government in delivering its obligations to those who served alongside our troops or who put themselves at risk by working to assist them as translators, guides or administrators.

It is now time, five years after the fall of Kabul, for the government to end the delays, the excuses and the attempts to minimise the dangers. Of course, applicants must be checked, and undesirables must not be allowed to take advantage of British generosity, but we are now talking about thousands of people who have been accepted for protection but are unable to make it to safety.

The UK must at long last finally discharge its obligations to our Afghan allies, promptly and in full.

Back to top ⤒

UK ‘failing to help eligible Afghans resettle’ despite threat from Taliban

Thousands of people who helped special forces or were exposed in the 2022 MoD data breach are trapped and unable to reach Britain, facing Taliban retribution, surveillance and searches

Holly Bancroft Home Affairs Correspondent

British and US military help some of the luckier Afghans evacuate Kabul in 2021 *(Getty)*

Thousands of Afghans promised sanctuary in the UK may remain at risk from Taliban attacks, the Ministry of Defence has admitted – but Britain still won’t help them flee Afghanistan.

Among those likely to be in danger are former special forces commandos, who served alongside UK special forces units and were wrongly abandoned after the Taliban takeover, while others still waiting were endangered when their personal details were exposed in a catastrophic MoD data breach in February 2022.

Around 7,000 Afghans have already been accepted to resettle, but are either stuck in Afghanistan or trapped in third countries as of 9 June 2026, because the UK stopped evacuation support in June 2025 – just before news of the data breach was made public.

Instead, anyone who wants to come here must now make their own way to Pakistan, where they will be housed and scheduled for flights to the UK. While some families have been able to make that journey themselves, with figures showing hundreds escaped between October and December 2025, campaigners have warned others cannot afford to travel, creating a "two-tier system".

Now, internal documents reveal that the MoD admits that Afghans awaiting relocation may be vulnerable to Taliban attacks and live in fear of persecution, while those known to have worked with Western forces "likely remain at higher residual risk".

A February 2026 MoD review, seen by *The Independent*, from the commander of Operation Lazurite – the programme launched to settle Afghans in the UK – reported that families may be at enhanced risk if they try to get travel documents to leave the country.

In a summary of conversations with other government departments, Major General Ben Cattermole, the operation commander, said that "the risk to individuals who may be eligible… remains real, albeit diminished". It continues: "It is selective and localised… and primarily contingent on visibility of the past association with UK forces."

It acknowledges that those who helped foreign militaries face fear of retribution, Taliban surveillance, and door-to-door searches, as well as social ostracism and the inability to work.

The summary added: “While there is no evidence of mass reprisals or organised purges, the potential for arbitrary detention, intimidation and targeted violence persists, especially where local commanders act autonomously or where individuals are publicly known to have worked with foreign militaries.”

Some former military personnel face Taliban persecution after being deported from Iran back to Afghanistan following the start of US-Israel war *(AFP/Getty)*

Maj Gen Cattermole concluded that recent targeting and killings of Afghans “may well be the result of recent transgressions, rather than their previous affiliation” to the UK government.

While Maj Gen Cattermole was considering the situation between November 2025 and January 2026, a recent report from the United Nations mission in Afghanistan said that killings of former Afghan security personnel were continuing. It documented eight deaths and 29 cases of arbitrary arrest or detention between April and June this year.

The UN said that former military personnel continue to be at risk when forcibly returned to Afghanistan, and gave the example of a former army officer who was deported from Iran to Herat on 10 April and went missing the same day.

News outlet Afghanistan International reported in July that the Taliban were compiling lists of hundreds of former security personnel in Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan and had begun to surveil them. A source said that the Taliban's intelligence service was collating information, including their names, fathers' names, phone numbers, and addresses, to ensure former security personnel did not pose a threat.

The MoD assessment, which emerged during recent High Court litigation, admits that the wealth of biometric data available to the Taliban on former government officials may put them at "enhanced risk" if they seek to leave the country, or travel through border posts.

But it also revealed that between 1 October and 31 December 2025, 60 families – around 224 people – were able to flee Afghanistan to Pakistan, the majority by getting on flights.

The review shows that the MoD is tracking the names and details of those reported as detained by the Taliban and cross-checking them against those offered resettlement in the UK, but the number of matches for the period October-December 2025 has been redacted as confidential.

The document says it has drawn upon expertise across government to inform the risk assessment, including from external stakeholders and other sources, such as *The Independent*'s reporting, which is referenced.

It also stresses the need for regular reassessments of the situation, something the influential defence committee of MPs has called for.

Professor Sara De Jong, from the Sulha Alliance, which supports Afghans who worked for the British army, said the government must do more to help those left stranded.

Afghan National Army commandos in action in Helmand Province in 2016 *(AFP/Getty)*

“As the government wants to complete Afghan resettlement within this parliament and recognises ongoing risks for Afghans associated with the UK, it would make much more sense to step up relocation support rather than cancel it. Especially as the geopolitical situation with Pakistan means Afghans have fewer ways out and fewer resources after almost five years living in fear under Taliban rule,” she said.

She added that while the review, which cites her research, details the number of people who managed to self-move, it is “silent on the number who are unable to do so, and so can only give a partial picture”.

In a recent report on the MoD data breach, MPs called on the department to publish a clear policy for Afghans who cannot safely, lawfully or afford to move to a third country.

But the review warns that, without help from the UK, the movement of people out of Afghanistan and into accommodation in Islamabad will be hard to control.

The government previously used a third-party provider to evacuate Afghan families eligible for relocation to the UK from October 2021, but that stopped in June 2025 “when it was paused ahead of the lifting of the super-injunction” used to keep the MoD data breach secret.

The pause was maintained after the closure of the land border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and because of the operational risk of those helping people escape, documents show.

However, MoD officials have been exploring further ways to help Afghan families flee. This is being investigated “as a priority”, according to a ministerial brief from March 2026, giving hope that the department may be able to take some action to support those still waiting. Options floated seemed to include giving payments to those eligible to help fund their journey to the UK.

An MoD spokesperson said: “We continue to see no evidence of the systematic targeting of eligible persons because of their previous affiliation or because they have applied for the Afghan Resettlement Programme. Likewise, for those affected by the 2022 Afghan data incident, the independent Rimmer Review concluded that while there may be a residual risk to individuals associated with the former Afghan government, it is highly unlikely that merely being on the dataset would be grounds for targeting.

“The UK has operated exceptionally generous Afghan resettlement schemes and our ambition remains to conclude these schemes well within this parliament.”

Back to top ⤒

Even Reform hates Badenoch's plan to evict foreigners from social housing

A new Conservative housing policy has been attacked from all sides, writes **John Rentoul**

Kemi Badenoch and shadow home secretary Chris Philp on patrol in Surrey on Tuesday *(PA)*

Kemi Badenoch has announced a plan to end social housing for foreign nationals, "freeing homes up for British families and saving taxpayers millions". If the Conservative leader was hoping to secure headlines while the new prime minister was away on holiday, she succeeded.

The story led the *Daily Mail* – "Foreign nationals face social housing ban under Tories" – and *The Daily Telegraph* – "Tories to end social housing for foreigners". It was also, with a different slant, the front-page lead in *The Independent* – "Dismay at Tory plan to evict foreigners from social homes".

The plan has a certain simplicity to it, pitching to the apparently common sense idea that social benefits should be reserved for British citizens. Most people would agree, as the Tory press release put it, that there should be a "link between contribution and entitlement", and that the right to a council house "should be earned".

What exactly is the Tory plan?

It is, inevitably, not quite as simple as the headline. It is to end existing social housing tenancies for *non-EU* foreign nationals within six months and to end *new* social housing tenancies for all foreign nationals.

Existing tenancies for EU citizens are protected by the terms of our withdrawal agreement with the EU, so the Conservatives exclude them from the plan to evict existing tenants – while promising not to let any new social homes to foreigners, EU and non-EU nationals alike.

The party estimates that about 230,000 households currently in social housing would become ineligible under the policy. The policy would apply to single-person households and to couples, if both adults are foreign nationals, whether or not they have children.

So what is wrong with it?

The big problem is that people who have been granted indefinite leave to remain (ILR), or the right to "settle" in the UK, are on a path to citizenship. They have either made a contribution to the UK, or have been accepted as refugees, because those are the grounds on which ILR is granted.

That means, as Labour ministers have pointed out, that people who have worked in the NHS and other public services for years would be penalised.

Angela Rayner, the housing secretary, said: “No amount of headline-chasing, or following Reform to the extremes, can conceal the damage the Tories did to housing in this country.

“People without ILR are already ineligible for social housing, so the Tories are targeting refugees and long-term UK residents who have contributed to this country but are not British citizens, including NHS staff.”

Terminating tenancies at six months’ notice would amount to a retrospective change in the law, and would probably be found contrary not just to the European Convention on Human Rights but to English law – although the Tories are committed to withdrawal from the ECHR and British law can be rewritten by parliament.

What does Reform UK think is wrong with it?

Nigel Farage’s party thinks the Tory plan does not go far enough – because it excludes EU nationals from eviction. Zia Yusuf, the party’s home affairs spokesperson, said: “The Tories are trying to copy Reform UK policy, but they still end up betraying their instincts to prioritise foreigners. Incredibly, Kemi Badenoch’s new policy is to allow tens of thousands of foreign nationals from the EU to occupy British social housing funded by British taxpayers.”

What else is wrong with it?

One line from Helen Whateley, the shadow work and pensions secretary, quoted in the Tory press release, struck a particularly discordant note: “Labour has lost control of immigration and lost control of the welfare bill.”

Only two years ago, she and Badenoch were ministers in a Conservative government that had allowed net immigration to quadruple to nearly 1 million a year – and had allowed the welfare bill to continue to grow. And if this is such a good idea now, why didn't the Conservatives do it then?

Back to top

Serial sex offender was free to kill two women because of police blunders

Simon Levy has been convicted of killing Carmenza Valencia-Trujillo and Sheryl Wilkins

Margaret Davis

Levy, 40, was arrested for both offences in September *(Photos Metropolitan Police)*

A "predatory" serial sex attacker was left free to murder two women because police and court blunders saw him released on bail, allowing him to prey on other victims.

Simon Levy, of Tottenham, north London, was found guilty by a jury at the Old Bailey yesterday for murdering Carmenza Valencia-Trujillo, 53, and Sheryl Wilkins, 39, five months apart last year.

The Metropolitan Police, British Transport Police (BTP), and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) are all facing serious questions over how Levy was allowed to grope, rape and murder women between February 2023 and August 2025.

The timeline of his escalating crimes reveals a string of errors where officials failed to stop a dangerous predator who was already a registered sex offender.

The 40-year-old fatally suffocated both women in sexually motivated attacks, with Valencia-Trujillo found in a largely abandoned block of flats on the Aylesbury estate in southeast London, and Wilkins behind a car park wall near Tottenham High Road, north London.

He was also convicted of two counts of rape and assault occasioning grievous bodily harm (GBH) with intent, as well as non-fatal suffocation over a brutal sex attack in January 2025, which the victim survived. The car park was also where Levy carried out the January rape, which left the victim unconscious with a broken collarbone.

Levy was brought into police custody for questioning on 4 September and charged soon after.

Members of the victims' families burst into tears as the verdict was delivered after the jury deliberated for 13 hours.

Levy had already been sentenced for 11 counts of sexual assault at an earlier trial

Prosecutor Will Martin said his desire to sexually assault women was “on the verge of compulsive or pathological”.

Speaking outside the Old Bailey, Detective Chief Inspector Neil John, from Scotland Yard, said: “Simon Levy is a dangerous and predatory offender. His crimes were calculated, cruel and deeply disturbing. Throughout the trial, he has shown complete disregard for the victims and victim-survivor, despite being fully aware of the lasting and devastating impact of his actions.”

Flanked by Wilkins's two sisters and the daughter of Valencia-Trujillo, he appealed for any more victim-survivors of Levy who have yet to come forward to contact the police.

Valencia-Trujillo's children described her as a "big character" and "full of life". She became a grandmother in 2024 and was said to be a "much-loved" member of the community with a love of salsa-dancing.

The family of mother-of-four Wilkins said she was a much-loved woman and was missed every day by those who knew her.

Jurors heard that Levy was already a registered sex offender. He sexually assaulted two women in 2018 and was jailed in 2021.

Carmenza Valencia-Trujillo has been described as a 'big character' and 'full of life'

He assaulted a prison officer while in jail in 2022, then once released, groped a woman on the Tube in October 2023, three more in October the following year, and beat and raped another in January 2025, before he murdered Valencia-Trujillo in March 2025.

He then sexually assaulted six more women on the Tube – one in March, three in April and two in May 2025, before he murdered Wilkins in August last year.

Jurors saw through his claims that all the contact had somehow been accidental on wobbly or crowded trains, or after he became partially sighted in May 2024.

He would grope the young women he had chosen as victims, with some reacting angrily when they realised what had happened.

One called him a pervert and emptied a can of Coca-Cola over him, while another shouted at him not to touch her.

He was convicted of 10 counts of sexual assault on the Tube, and an 11th at Brixton prison, by a jury at Inner London Crown Court on 4 February.

An Old Bailey jury reached verdicts after deliberating for 13 hours. Levy, who wore sunglasses in court, made no reaction as the verdicts were delivered.

Sheryl Wilkins was murdered less than two weeks after one of Levy's hearings

Levy was arrested by BTP in November 2024 for four sexual assaults on the Tube, for which he has since been separately convicted, but delays in organising an identification parade until the following April left him free to carry out the rape and first murder.

When they took details of his Oyster card, BTP officers did not realise that it had been stolen from a bus driver, meaning Levy had a free travel pass that he used on the day he murdered Valencia-Trujillo.

Following her death, he was released on bail at two magistrates' court hearings in May and June 2025, with the CPS admitting that it had not opposed bail at the first hearing, and the prosecutor had not given the court all the relevant information for consideration at the second hearing.

There were another three crown court hearings that he failed to attend for various reasons, yet no arrest warrant was requested. Less than two weeks after a hearing on 11 August, he murdered Wilkins.

His victims spoke of their shock at learning of his other crimes, with one, who cannot be named for legal reasons, telling the court: "After reporting the sexual assaults, it wasn't long before I learnt that my attacker was already known to the police for sexual violence and is a convicted sex offender.

"You could not begin to understand the horror I felt at hearing this."

Levy was found guilty by a jury at the Old Bailey

An Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) spokesperson said they are investigating the management of Simon Levy from his first conviction in September 2021 up to his arrest in September 2025.

They said: “Our independent investigation began in January following a voluntary conduct referral from the force, relating to alleged failures by two officers in his management following his prison release on licence in February 2023. We are examining whether action could or should have been taken to prevent his reoffending, and if all officers involved in his management followed policies, procedures, and training.

“We are also assessing whether any learning, whether individual, force-wide, or nationally or other changes should be implemented in light of the events under investigation. At this stage, we have served a gross misconduct notice on a police constable and a misconduct notice on a detective sergeant, which means that the actions of those officers are under investigation.

“The serving of conduct notices does not necessarily mean disciplinary proceedings will follow.”

People can contact the Metropolitan Police's incident room directly on 07751 700 330 or anonymously via Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

PA

Back to top

News

Counterterror police reopen Widdecombe attempted burglary probe

Conduct of officer reported to police watchdog after ‘failure to identify lines of inquiry’ in the 2025 case

Pol Allingham

Ann Widdecombe was found dead at her property in Haytor on Dartmoor, Devon, last month *(PA Archive)*

Counterterror police investigating the death of Ann Widdecombe have reopened a probe into an attempted burglary in London last year.

The incident at an address in Greater London was reported in April 2025.

No arrests were made after an investigation by the Metropolitan Police and Counter Terrorism Policing (CTP), and the case was closed pending any new lines of inquiry.

Since it was reopened, CTP London has identified a line of inquiry "which may have been relevant" but was "not identified and pursued by them at the time".

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) is now investigating the "conduct" of a CTP London staff member, following an allegation that the employee "failed to identify and pursue a line of inquiry" related to the attempted burglary.

Reform UK spokeswoman and former Tory minister Ms Widdecombe, 78, died on 8 July after she was hit over the head with a hammer 21 times at her home in Haytor on Dartmoor, Devon.

Joshua Kerry, 28, was charged with her murder on 20 July.

He was also arrested on suspicion of the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism. He has not been charged in connection with the new probe.

Senior national co-ordinator for Counter Terrorism Policing, Vicki Evans, said: "As part of the ongoing investigation led by Counter Terrorism Policing South East into the murder of Ann Widdecombe, officers have reopened an investigation into an incident reported to police last year."

She added: "Given the nature of this matter and the significant public interest in the investigation into Ann Widdecombe's death, it was of critical importance for us to provide this update."

CTP London made a "mandatory conduct referral" to the IOPC yesterday

An IOPC spokesperson said: "We can confirm that the IOPC has decided to independently investigate the conduct of a Counter

Terrorism Policing London staff member following a referral received earlier today.

“The conduct relates to an allegation the individual failed to identify and pursue a line of inquiry relating to an attempted burglary reported in April 2025.

“Counter Terrorism Policing London has been notified of our decision, and no further information is available at this early stage.”

PA

Back to top

Cambridge to continue probe into professor at centre of plagiarism row

Jason Arday quit his high-profile role after becoming the university's youngest black professor

Ellie Ng

Prof Arday's resignation followed a series of reports alleging he plagiarised his PhD thesis *(St Mary's University Twickenham)*

The University of Cambridge has confirmed it will continue investigating a professor who resigned amid a plagiarism row, adding that findings will feed into a review of the process for appointing senior academic roles.

Professor Jason Arday quit his high-profile role at the prestigious university on Wednesday after it launched a probe into his "academic qualifications and honorary appointments".

Senior dons at Cambridge are understood to be circulating a letter calling for an inquiry into the processes around his appointment, according to *The Guardian*.

Prof Arday's resignation followed a series of media reports alleging he plagiarised his PhD thesis – completed at Liverpool John Moores University – and other research.

Further questions were asked about the truth of other claims made by the professor of sociology of education, who became Cambridge's youngest black professor in 2023, including saying that he ran 600 miles in six days and that he had raised £5.5m for charity.

In a statement yesterday, Cambridge said: "As has been widely reported, Jason Arday has resigned from his post at the university with immediate effect.

"Regardless of this, and for clarification, the university will continue to investigate the circumstances around Jason Arday's appointment and tenure. The findings will feed into a review of the process for the appointment of senior academic roles.

"In addition, and as previously stated, the university's Research Policy Committee will review the misconduct in research policy."

Jesus College said previously that it was launching its own process in relation to the allegation.

Prof Arday said he had 'reached the limits of what any person should reasonably be expected to endure'

An investigation at Liverpool John Moores University cleared Prof Arday of wrongdoing.

One of the academics calling for an inquiry, Priyamvada Gopal, told *The Guardian*: "An independent investigation must scrutinise how such an early-career appointment to a very senior and prestigious professorial chair was made and what both the faculty of education and university management may have got very badly wrong."

The professor of postcolonial studies at Cambridge's English faculty added: "Whatever the results of any investigation, the university bears no little responsibility for the grotesque racism which this whole business has unleashed, and for the harm done both to the individual in the line of fire, to black academics as a group, and the broader field of critical race studies."

In the wake of Prof Arday's resignation, academics said his case will provide those who condemn diversity and equality initiatives with a "weapon" and put off other black scholars from the field.

Alan Lester, professor of historical geography at the University of Sussex, told the Press Association: “The tragedy is that this case now provides the far-right racists who condemn any equalities and diversity initiatives with a weapon that they will wield egregiously.”

Kehinde Andrews, who was until recently professor of black studies at Birmingham City University, told Sky News: “No one’s handing out favours to black people in higher education, and that idea is deeply dangerous and deeply racist.

“There is a whole campaign to get more black professors in, but the experiences that we have tend to be horrendous and it does put people off from trying to even get into these places in the first place.”

Prof Arday said in his open resignation letter that the “only way to bring this chapter to an end is to step away”.

In the letter addressed to colleagues published on the Good Law Project’s website, he said: “This decision should not be interpreted as a loss of faith in scholarship or in the values that first brought me to Cambridge.

“Nor should it be mistaken for an acceptance of the narratives that have surrounded me.

“It is simply the decision of someone who has reached the limits of what any person should reasonably be expected to endure.”

His memoir, *Great And Unfortunate Things*, is due to be published by Simon & Schuster later this month.

PA

Back to top ⤒

News

Volunteers race to stop millions of plastic nurdles spreading along coast

The plastic could harm river wildlife for years to come if it's not removed

Jane Dalton

Activists and residents delivered a letter to port chiefs *(Leah Pattem)*

Volunteers are furious that authorities delayed them from joining a clean-up operation of tonnes of plastic pellets that had spilled into the sea.

Campaigners say the estimated 1 billion nurdles, which poured out of containers from a ship at the Port of Tyne, are fatal to seabirds and marine animals, and are spreading dangerously along the coastline.

The Tyne Rivers Trust says fish have already been caught with nurdles inside them, and is warning the plastic could harm river wildlife for years to come.

The spill occurred less than three miles from Marsden Bay, home to one of England's most important seabird colonies.

The accident happened on 19 July when the ship Wind Orca, leaving dock, hit another vessel, the *BG Orange,* which was berthed, damaging three containers with pellets in.

Volunteers have been picking tiny nurdles out of the sand *(Leah Pattem)*

After a huge clean-up operation began, estimates put the amount of nurdles left in the sea at 17 tonnes.

Nurdles, which are usually less than 5mm long, are used to manufacture everyday plastic products.

In water, they are carried by tides, currents and winds, and may travel long distances or become trapped in wildlife habitats, making them difficult to recover.

Fish, birds and other wildlife may mistake them for food, causing malnutrition and starvation, because they look like fish eggs. Experts say the effects ripple through the food chain and may ultimately harm people.

Residents and activists are angry that immediately after the spillage, local authorities told volunteers not to collect the nurdles.

“This created uncertainty for communities keen to help and limited the ability of organisations to actively encourage volunteer clean-ups,” Surfers Against Sewage said.

Nurdles on the water surface at South Groyne beach, South Shields *(Tessa Bunney)*

“Every hour that passes significantly decreases the chances of the disaster being contained.”

Specialist contractors have been cleaning up, but groups representing 2,500 residents and campaigners wrote to Port of Tyne chief executive Matt Beeton, criticising the “delayed and inadequate” response. It was also signed by the National Trust, two regional mayors and Northumberland Wildlife Trust.

“The contractors you brought in are not enough. You must allow qualified, trained waterfolk onto the River Tyne and allow a coordinated, high-capacity waterfront recovery force into the River Tyne immediately before these microplastics disperse further up and down the coast and into the marine environment,” the letter said.

Surfers Against Sewage also claimed the spill was not formally declared a major incident and there was no comprehensive government-led response.

They have drafted an open letter to the Environment Minister calling for a formal declaration of a major incident, the closure of port operations to enable an effective clean-up, consequences for those responsible for the pollution and urgent reform to prevent future nurdle spills.

Nurdle collection baskets were put out *(Leah Pattem)*

Some councils later amended their guidance to allow volunteer collection of nurdles in certain locations, they said.

“In the absence of a formal emergency declaration, local people have stepped up,” SAS said, and hundreds of volunteers joined

clean-up efforts.

Nurdles break down into microplastics, which pollute the environment for years.

Rowan Stanforth, of environmental charity Fidra, said: “It’s devastating to see another plastic pellet spill, just over a year since the last one in the North Sea.

“In a nurdle spill like this time is of the essence.

“We are now seeing evidence of seabirds eating the pellets.”

He said nurdles can pick up pathogens such as E.coli but spills can be prevented with better packaging and safer stowage, and he called for stronger regulation.

It’s understood councils advised people not to handle nurdles so that the volume recovered could be measured to estimate how much remained in the water.

Volunteer Benjamin Buist removing nurdles by hand, Longsands Beach, Tynemouth *(Tessa Bunney)*

The Environment Agency, which has launched an investigation, said it did not advise against collecting the nurdles, saying all guidance came from local authorities.

A government spokesperson said: “The North East’s spectacular coastline is one of the nation's greatest assets. People are right to be angry and to demand answers.

“The Environment Agency has been on this from the start, supporting partners, and is now stepping up its work on the ground. The environment secretary has spoken with the mayor to discuss the response and next steps.”

Gary Kirsop, head of community operations at South Tyneside Council, which is leading the clean-up, said the authority had been “working tirelessly alongside partners” since the nurdles began washing up.

"From the outset, council teams have responded swiftly, monitoring affected areas, carrying out clean-up operations around tidal conditions, supporting environmental assessments and providing information and guidance to residents,” he said.

Volunteers at Tynemouth *(Laura Moscrop)*

“Staff from a range of services have gone above and beyond in challenging conditions to help protect our coastline and minimise environmental impacts.”

He said significant progress had been made but it would be a long-term operation.

A council spokesperson said: “A major incident was declared through established protocols, including emergency services and local authorities in the affected area, and partner organisations immediately activated a coordinated multi-agency response.”

The Port of Tyne said it had acted quickly after the spill to contain the damage.

Port chiefs said that less than 24 hours after discovering the spillage, they contacted a specialist emergency response company and a containment boom was in place three days after the spill.

Back to top ⤒

Pictures of the Day

(PA Wire)

Seed money

Burryman Andrew Taylor parades through South Queensferry, near Edinburgh, encased in burrs and stopping along the way to receive a dram of whisky or collect donations. *PA*

Eyes on the prize

A horse wearing blinkers at Brighton Racecourse. *Getty*

Sweet escape

Sugar candy sellers at a railway station in Mumbai. *AFP/Getty*

More brown than blue

People walk on an exposed sandbank on the River Danube following exceptionally low water levels in Rasova, Romania. *AP*

Brutal swim

Visitors swim in the pool set up in front of the Volksbuehne theatre in Berlin. *AFP/Getty*

PA

Back to top

Home news in brief

A petition for Amanda Knox's show at Edinburgh Fringe to be cancelled has been signed by over 6,000 people *(Getty)*

Fringe boss defends Knox's comedy show

The Edinburgh Fringe boss has said that "we are not afraid of controversy" following calls for Amanda Knox's comedy show at the festival to be cancelled. Knox was falsely imprisoned for the murder of her friend Meredith Kercher in Italy back in 2007. After being convicted in 2009 for the murder and sexual assault of the British foreign exchange student – along with her then boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito – Knox was eventually cleared six years later.

Now, over a decade later, the American's plans to bring comedy show *Cartwheel* to the famed Edinburgh festival this month have sparked controversy, with more than 6,000 people signing a petition calling for it to be axed. Kercher's sister Stephanie has

said the show being comedic "normalises and trivialises violence against women".

Speaking on BBC Radio Scotland, Tony Lancaster, the director of the Fringe Society, said the festival is no stranger to causing rancour. "We're not afraid of controversy," he said. "The decision as to whether or not [the show] goes ahead lies with Amanda herself, and it lies with the venue. Those are conversations that they can have, but as far as I'm concerned, I believe that if you are opening up a stage and calling it an open-access festival and inviting people in to tell their stories, you have to be prepared for some controversy – it's going to happen.

"As sympathetic as we are to individual cases that crop up, and absolutely as a parent, I can relate to the pain that they describe, but that can't be a criteria, it can't be one of the lenses that we look through." The Fringe Society is not responsible for programming, he added, with venues being able to put on their own shows which the society will sell tickets for. *PA*

Pop producer William Orbit dies, aged 69

Music producer William Orbit – who worked with the likes of Madonna, All Saints and Blur – has died at the age of 69. In a prolific career spanning four decades, Orbit both released his own music and worked with other acts as a producer and songwriter, winning multiple Grammy awards. His death was announced yesterday, with a post on Orbit's official Instagram account telling fans he died at home on 23 July. No cause of death was shared. A statement, attributed to his family and friends, read: "We are deeply saddened by his passing. He will be greatly missed by us and by so many whose lives he touched with his music, friendship and kindness."

Orbit defined the spacey sound of late Nineties and early Noughties pop, fusing electronica with jungle, trip-hop and new-age, and dominating the charts with production on songs

including All Saints' "Pure Shores", Blur's "Coffee & TV" and several by Madonna, with whom he had his most fruitful collaboration. After being impressed by his work on a remix of one of her early Nineties singles, Madonna personally selected Orbit to produce what would become her 1998 album *Ray of Light*.

He'd further collaborate with her on the *Austin Powers 2* single "Beautiful Stranger", along with songs on her later albums including 2000's *Music*. Orbit was awarded three Grammys for his work with Madonna: Best Pop Album for *Ray of Light* and Best Dance Recording for the lead single of the same name, while "Beautiful Stranger" was named Best Song Written For Visual Media. Other artists who went on to work with Orbit included U2, No Doubt, Melanie C, Pink and Britney Spears.

Having struggled with drug-induced mental health issues during a rough period in 2020, he told *The Guardian* in 2021: "I realised that I had to grow up a bit. I've just left my adolescence. It's great being 65 – it's easier than being 40, because you're an old dude and you don't have an agenda any more."

Prison officer jailed over fling with drug dealer

A prison officer has been jailed for eight months after engaging in an inappropriate relationship with a drug dealer who styled himself as the "Latvian Pablo Escobar". Jahvine Kwamba, 21, was working at HMP Fosse Way in Leicestershire when she began a relationship with prisoner Roberts Sokolovs. Leicester Crown Court heard that Kwamba initiated contact with Sokolovs 1,367 times while he was held at the category C prison between 24 February and 3 June 2024.

Sokolovs, who was imprisoned in 2022 for his involvement in the "Jimmy Line" county lines drug ring operating between Skelmersdale, Lancashire, and Lincoln, was later transferred to an immigration removal centre at Gatwick airport in June 2024.

Prosecution counsel Rawaid Javed told the court that sexually explicit photographs and messages were exchanged between the pair on Snapchat after this transfer. The court heard that there were 5,441 contacts between Kwamba and Sokolovs on Snapchat while he was at HMP Fosse Way, and a further 4,211 contacts while he was at the removal centre.

Kwamba denies any physical sexual contact, a claim the prosecution stated it was “sceptical” about. Sokolovs was deported to Latvia in November 2024 and was never interviewed regarding the relationship. Kwamba, from Doncaster, South Yorkshire, was arrested in July 2024 and had previously pleaded guilty to two counts of misconduct in a public office. *PA*

Back to top ⤒

Teen kills grandparents before going on deadly rampage in Thai school

The suspected shooter, just 14, took his own life after killing seven and critically injuring 10

Shweta Sharma

Students are hugged by a relative after being evacuated from Debsirin Nonthaburi School, just outside Bangkok *(Reuters)*

A 14-year-old boy has gone on a shooting rampage in Thailand, killing at least seven people – including his own grandparents – before targeting pupils and teachers at his school.

The shooter, a grade 9 student, turned on his grandparents at the home he shared with them yesterday morning before attacking the high school and injuring 23 others in the country's worst mass shooting since 2022.

The police said the teenager fired at least 26 bullets using a gun that belonged to his grandfather. An additional 34 rounds were found. The suspected shooter died by suicide.

The attack began at around 10am local time at Debsirin Nonthaburi School in the Bang Kruai district of Nonthaburi province, located just outside Bangkok.

The student appeared to have shot his grandparents before attending school as normal. He waited until lessons started and began shooting inside his classroom before walking out and firing more shots, police spokesperson Trairong Piwpan said.

Students fleeing from Debsirin Nonthaburi School *(Reuters)*

Amporn Niamfuang, who owns a restaurant 50 metres from the school, said there was the sound of a single gunshot and then a pause. “And then there were multiple continuous shots,” he added, recalling how the narrow road outside the restaurant filled with terrified students. Students were running scared and pouring onto the street. Young girls were holding each other’s hands and crying.”

As the incident unfolded, police urged people to hide and wait for the authorities, saying that the shooter was believed to be inside a computer room.

Thai police said five victims died at the school, which teaches about 3,000 students ranging from 12 to 18, and of those injured, 10 remain in critical condition. Students were seen streaming out of the school, on the capital's northwestern outskirts, as the wounded were loaded onto ambulances and teachers hugged each other and cried.

Police take away computers from the home of the student *(AP)*

A video, shared to the police's Facebook handle, showed students crouching under desks inside a classroom as gunfire rang out in the background. "Who is still stuck there? Hide securely," the police wrote on their Facebook page as the attack took place.

A picture also showed one person lying on a stretcher outside an ambulance while a medic attended to another person.

An 18-year-old student said he first thought firecrackers were going off or someone was banging an object. "I didn't think it

was a gun at first," he said. "There were many shots: bang bang bang. Then it went quiet. Then it started again."

A teacher is comforted outside Debsirin *(Reuters)*

The suspect barricaded himself on the third floor of the school's building, according to a local media report. As the incident unfolded, police urged the public and media to stop livestreaming the incident and evacuated the teachers and students.

Emergency worker Kiatikhun Verapongpradith, 47, described arriving as the shooting was ongoing and said his team treated students with injuries in the back, chest and arms.

They found a male teacher lying dead on an upper floor of the school, and in another room they found a female teacher with wounds to her chest and arm.

A schoolgirl cries outside the school following the shootings *(AP)*

“We gave CPR for about 30 minutes and rushed her to the hospital as we could not get her heart rate up, but we tried our best,” he said.

The motive for the shooting is still being investigated, education minister Prasert Jantararuangtong told reporters.

Thailand’s prime minister Anutin Charnvirakul, speaking after touring the school, said the student had shown signs of stress connected to school.

All classes will be suspended next week and school staff have been instructed to work from home during that time.

Yesterday’s incident is the second major school shooting in Thailand this year.

The relative of a victim reacts while looking at their dead body *(Reuters)*

In February, a 17-year-old entered Patongprathankiriwat School in Hat Yai district, Songkhla province, after stealing a firearm from a police officer.

The student shot at the school director and a female student, briefly taking several teachers and students hostage. The school director died, and the shooter was eventually detained by police.

Thailand has strict gun laws, with illegal possession of firearms punishable with up to 10 years in jail.

However, the country is believed to have more than 10 million privately owned guns in circulation, according to data by the University of Sydney – one of the highest gun ownership rates in southeast Asia, and among the most per capita in Asia, according to a 2017 estimate by the Small Arms Survey.

Back to top ⤒

World

‘Blameless’ Trump claims voters are angry with Republicans but not him

Claim comes despite polls showing that majority of country is unhappy with the US president

Ariana Baio

Donald Trump faces record-low approval ratings and blame for higher costs *(Punchbowl News/YouTube)*

President Donald Trump acknowledged that the odds are stacked against him in the upcoming midterm election, saying voters are angry with Republicans – yet still maintained that he was exempt from their growing frustrations.

With roughly three months until the midterms, the president and his allies are stumping for Republican candidates and tearing down Democratic policies in the hopes of maintaining the GOP’s narrow majority in Congress. But it’s an uphill battle

for Mr Trump – who can no longer appear on the ballot – as he faces record-low approval ratings and blame for higher costs due to the unpopular war with Iran.

“The question is, will they vote? Because a lot of them are very angry at Republicans, to be honest with you,” he told *Punchbowl News* in an interview that aired yesterday.

Yet Mr Trump insisted: “I mean, they’re angry at Republicans, but they’re not angry at me. They’re not angry at me.”

Across the board, polls show that a majority of the country is unhappy with the president’s handling of his job.

A recent Reuters/Ipsos poll found Mr Trump’s approval rating at 35 per cent. Another AP/NORC poll from July put his approval rating at 33 per cent. A Quinnipiac University survey determined Mr Trump had a 32 per cent approval rating.

Much of the disapproval appears to be tied to the ongoing military conflict with Iran. Mr Trump’s decision to bomb Iran earlier this year has led to a prolonged conflict, where at least 18 US service members have been killed, gas prices have increased by $1, and inflation has ticked up.

Trump has issued endorsements and begun campaigning for Republican candidates ahead of the upcoming mid-term elections *(Reuters)*

Maga voters are more likely to approve of Mr Trump's war with Iran, but even among the demographic, support decreased over the last few months as the president goes back and forth between continuing strikes and negotiating a peace deal.

Some Republicans have warned that the negative impact of the Iran war, particularly on the economy, could hurt them in the upcoming midterms. Mr Trump initially ran on a platform of lowering everyday costs for Americans, in addition to promising not to start new wars.

Already, Republican lawmakers were looking at a difficult midterm since, historically, the party in charge of the executive branch loses seats in Congress because voters are looking for change.

There have only been two midterm election cycles over the last 80 years in which a president's party gained seats in Congress, and both had atypical circumstances surrounding them – the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the impeachment of former president Bill Clinton in 1998.

During his interview with *Punchbowl News*, Mr Trump recalled that midterms are famously difficult for the party in power but still kept a positive outlook.

"I think we're going to win," he said. "Not everybody was a bad president. We've had good presidents and even good presidents, they tend to lose the midterms. So, I don't know what that is. Other than that, I say we should win easily."

Back to top ⤒

Urgent search for huge lizard spotted in Italy, 13,000km away from habitat

Locals have been banned from walking in the Lombardy area where the lizard was spotted

Alex Croft

The giant Papuan monitor lizard was first spotted in a Lombardy farmhouse last month *(Italian media)*

"For you, it's a joke, but for me it's not," the frustrated mayor of a small town in northern Italy told reporters, leading a dramatic search operation like no other.

Caught in the bright flash of a local worker's camera, a giant Papuan monitor lizard was spotted weeks ago around the Gasparina farmhouse near the town of Montichiari, in Italy's Lombardian countryside.

First seen in early July, more than 13,000km from its native habitat of Papua New Guinea, the reptile quickly captured the country's attention. Local authorities mobilised vast resources for the search and have banned pedestrians from walking in the area it was sighted.

But what started as a fascinating hunt for the elusive lizard, followed by a captivated social media audience, quickly turned into a headache for local authorities.

"I'm harassed all day by newspapers, media, and TV," mayor Marco Togni told reporters, according to *Il Gorno Brescia*. "Whoever abandoned him is an idiot, but this story must end: if it's true that he's dead, let us find him."

Italian outlet *La Sicilia* said in late July there had been three sightings in just two weeks. But in an appeal for more sightings, the mayor assured that if it is dead, whoever finds it will not be in trouble. It is illegal to either keep or kill – except in self-defence – any reptiles of the Varanidae family in Italy, including the Papuan monitor.

"If he's dead, I don't care whose fault it is, but I simply ask that he be placed on the side of a road clearly visible to everyone, so we can close this matter and leave the provincial police and forestry police free to devote themselves to other matters," the mayor added, a fortnight after the photograph was taken.

It appears that the reptile is still on the loose. *The Independent* has contacted the Montichiari council and Italian Carabinieri for an update but has not yet received a response.

Bresciaoggi reported that authorities have used drones and cage traps in their search. Television crews from broadcasters Rai and Mediaset have also attempted to locate the large lizard.

The lizard is under threat by poaching and deforestation *(Wiki Commons)*

According to *The Times*, thermal imagery and night vision are being used in the search for the 1.5-metre lizard. "The reptile is cold-blooded," Mr Togni told the outlet. "It warms itself in the sun, so we hope the thermal cameras will detect a difference in temperature."

The Papuan monitor, also known as a crocodile monitor, is threatened by poaching and deforestation, and is protected by CITES, a multilateral treaty that protects endangered animals from the threat of international trade.

They typically have blunt, rounded heads with long, sharp teeth and curved claws, and can grow as long as 2.5 metres. Living among the swamps and coastal rainforests in southeastern New Guinea, they feed on anything from small mammals to birds, and even other smaller reptiles.

Encyclopedia Britannica lists them as the third most-dangerous lizard in the world, known for being very aggressive when approached.

Mr Togni told *The Times* that local authorities do not know how it ended up in northern Italy, and proposed it must have been kept illegally. “It either escaped or was abandoned.”

When he first saw the animal, he “didn’t initially believe it could be true”, but after authorities verified the image, they have confirmed that it is “absolutely real”.

For the locals, the presence of the lizard in their local area presents a constant danger.

“Shortly after that famous sighting and photograph, we glimpsed the animal fleeing; let’s say we saw a shadow,” said the owner of the Gasparini farmhouse, where the lizard was first spotted, speaking to *Bresciaoggi*.

“We were afraid for our men who go out to irrigate at night, but we haven’t seen it since. We don’t know exactly how long it’s been around or where it’s hiding, but we certainly have an idea,” he added.

“Between Lonato and Calcinato, after a double bend, there are underground canals of the Medio Chiese River, disused but still with water; it could be hiding around there.”

Back to top ⤒

World news in brief

Spain's prime minister Pedro Sanchez (left) and interior minister Fernando Grande Marlaska (right) visit Ceuta last week *(AFP/Getty)*

Spain retaliates with border controls on Italy

Spain is imposing border controls on all travel from Italy following its threat to retaliate after Rome introduced similar measures. The Spanish government said it would conduct passport, nationality and visa checks for Italians arriving from their country over the next month amid the country's "persistent irregular migratory pressure".

Italy declared earlier that it would not bow to "ultimatums or impositions" from Spain, confirming its intention to maintain border controls on arrivals from the country until at least 15 August. It came after Madrid demanded Rome lift its border checks, which were imposed last week following a influx of more

than 60,000 migrants from Morocco into the Spanish exclave of Ceuta, by Sunday.

In a statement, the Italian government clarified that it would only reconsider its decision once it was assured there were no security or terrorism risks, no new migration wave, and no irregular migrants making their way towards European territory.

The Spanish government, for its part, condemned Italy's move to reintroduce checks on arrivals from Spain as "unjustified, contrary to the interests of the European Union and discriminatory against the Spanish population ... If it fails to (remove the controls) before Sunday, August 9, Spain will be forced to adopt proportionate measures to protect the interests and dignity of its citizens." *Reuters*

Trump ordered to stop building ballroom

President Donald Trump doesn't have the authority to fast-track his new White House ballroom without Congress's authority, a divided panel of appellate court judges in Washington DC said yesterday.

In the latest blow to Mr Trump's efforts to build the 90,000sq ft (8,360sq m) addition to the White House, two judges on the DC Court of Appeals ruled the president must halt construction until he seeks Congress's approval.

"Each president is a temporary tenant, not the owner, of the White House and its Executive Residence," the judges wrote. "We are aware of no instance in American history in which a president unilaterally and using privately collected funds demolished substantial portions of the White House that Congress authorised to be built and American taxpayers paid for. Until now."

The court will pause the ruling from taking effect for two weeks to give the Trump administration time to appeal to the Supreme

Court.

Asean demands Suu Kyi's immediate release

The United States and the influential bloc of Southeast Asian nations have issued separate statements demanding the unconditional release of detained Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The statements were issued a few days after Ms Suu Kyi held her first meeting with a foreign official since she was ousted from power and detained in a 2021 coup.

Both the US and the Philippines, which chairs the 11-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) this year, called for the immediate release of Ms Suu Kyi and everyone else detained since the military seized power, while welcoming her meeting with a Red Cross official earlier this week.

"We urge the further expansion of access to persons held in detention in Myanmar since February 2021, and reiterate our call for their release, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's complete and unconditional release," the Asean chair said in its statement. It said it hoped the visit would open the way for regular and sustained access to Ms Suu Kyi for her family, her lawyers, doctors and humanitarian organisations.

Separately, the US embassy in Myanmar and the US State Department called for her "immediate and unconditional release", adding: "We hope this visit marks the beginning of regular humanitarian access to Aung San Suu Kyi and serves as a pathway to greater access to all political prisoners".

Low river levels cause energy crisis in Hungary

Hungary's Paks nuclear plant continues to face a "difficult" situation, despite expectations of a temporary rise in Danube river levels following rain in Austria, according to prime minister Peter Magyar in a Facebook video yesterday.

The plant has been operating at approximately 10 per cent of its full capacity since late last week, a direct result of a prolonged heatwave and record-low water levels in the Danube, which have severely strained the country's power supply capabilities.

Mr Magyar said the government was working on solutions at Paks if low water levels in the Danube, which the plant uses as a coolant, become permanent. Last week he said Hungary would develop four gigawatts of wind energy capacity by 2030 to diversify its energy sources.

Mr Magyar added: "We expect the water level to rise a good 20cm in the next few days. However, as there is no rain expected again from tomorrow, this rise is expected to be temporary ... Climate change is already here, and we need to build a country that can adapt to this". *Reuters*

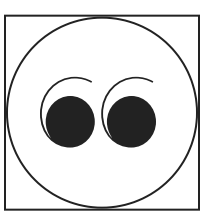
Back to top ⤒

Voices

I wanted a heatwave break. As we passed Preston, I realised my mistake

It's one thing to want to escape the heat but quite another to actually act on it, says **Charlotte Cripps**, who headed off to Blackpool, where temperatures are significantly lower than in the southeast of England. It quickly turned into the holiday from hell

After a visit to the beach, we headed to Primark to buy some coats, hoodies and leggings *(Photos Charlotte Cripps/The Independent)*



A single dad friend recently told me he'd booked Iceland for a fishing trip for his children as their summer "coolcation" to get some respite from the UK heatwaves.

So, like a lot of British holidaymakers, I also looked into this new, alternate type of trip for people who can't stand the heat a second longer. According to one travel website, online searches for "coolcations" have risen 420 per cent in the past three months, while specific searches for "escape the heat" rose 300 per cent.

That is why I packed up the car and drove my children, Lola, 10, and Liberty, eight, to Blackpool. I wanted a break, yes, but not just any old holiday: I wanted a total break from the scorching sun.

As wildfires tear through France, Spain, and Portugal and Greece, and major supermarkets in the UK have removed disposable barbecues from sale, I cancelled my plans to go to the Greek island of Naxos – and instead headed up the M1.

Under normal circumstances, Blackpool is not my No 1 dream holiday location, but it ticked all the boxes: my children's wonderful grandma lives there, northern hospitality is like no other, and, crucially, I could take my senior golden retriever Muggles.

But the biggest pull? The significantly cooler temperatures to London.

With a sixth potential heatwave on the cards next week in the southeast of England, the fact that I could enjoy refreshing temperatures of around 19C or 20C this weekend rather than highs of 35C in London made the just over four-hour car journey worth every second.

As we drove further north, the change in temperature was initially welcome and a novelty. But as we passed Preston, I felt the full weight of what we'd let ourselves in for. Even the dog was cold.

> *It might sound dramatic, but with the kids crying and saying they were about to 'die of cold' as we waited for the AA, I felt like my world had ended*

Only two weeks ago, I'd stepped off a plane in Corsica, with its turquoise sea, to be blasted by a wave of heat like I'd opened an oven door. Now I was trying to open my car door in a blustery gale in Blackpool. I tried to get the dog out, who was wedged in the footwell. It felt like I'd stepped into the run-up to Christmas and had a bout of self-inflicted seasonal affective disorder.

The first chilly morning, after breaking the expensive DeLonghi coffee machine in the Airbnb by putting the coffee beans in the wrong section, I started to wonder if I'd been cursed. My car broke down in the middle of a high street on the way to find a coffee, warning lights flashing "low battery". All the vehicle's electrics started flickering like in a horror film. It might sound dramatic, but with the kids crying and saying they were about to "die of cold" as we waited for the AA, I felt like my world had ended.

We had nothing to wear apart from shorts and T-shirts. It hadn't crossed my mind to pack a jumper, because I had only just physiologically acclimatised myself to living in a UK heatwave. Weeks before, I'd done a mad dash to Currys to grab a fan tower. Now, I was doing an emergency shop in Blackpool town centre's Primark for hoodies, coats and leggings, as well as fleece PJs.

We ended up in an arcade on Lytham St Anne's pier, where my children won toxic squishy dumplings, which cheered them up. It was far too cold to hang out on the beach, and the sea looked... uninviting, as the dull brown coloured waves crashed into the pier. So we had lunch huddled together eating fish and chips by the beach with a load of seagulls, next to a shop that sold 12in-long chocolate eclairs.

Of course, it was special to see their grandma. But the truth is, it would have been better to see her in the autumn or winter than to put ourselves through this ordeal in the summer holidays.

Back at the Airbnb, the hope of warming up in the jacuzzi at the bottom of the garden was dashed when the hosts told me it hadn't worked since Storm Dave in April, when the lid lifted up in the wind and crashed down, damaging the thermostat. Now, the temperature wouldn't budge from 11C.

We are still here. Now the idea of catching the next easyJet out of Gatwick for a last-minute summer holiday has never seemed more appealing. I just can't wait to return to the southeast of England to hot weather. I am suffering from winter blues in August, my serotonin levels are down, and I feel like duvet diving. The endless days of excessive heat seem like a distant dream, an exciting romance that has vanished and left me bereft.

All I want is to be back home in west London complaining about the sweltering heat, and staggering to the freezer for some ice cubes. I've taken the hot weather for granted. Coolcations? I'd rather burn.

Back to top ⤒

Voices

Badenoch is creating a new – and very odd – type of Conservative Party

The Tory leader has created an upside-down party where former neo-Nazis can run as councillors, but anyone hoping to stop the world from catching fire is banned, writes **Alan Rusbridger**

Badenoch has come out fighting for Joshua Bonehill-Paine, an ex-Neo Nazi *(PA)*

Joshua Bonehill-Paine was a nasty piece of work. He served two jail sentences for vile antisemitism, and harassed Luciana Berger, then a Jewish MP, calling her a “rodent” and an “evil money-grabber”. He created a poster for an “anti-Jewification” march in Golders Green, saying it would be an “absolute gas.”

That’s not all. He founded a neo-Nazi party, National British Resistance, and has a further conviction for assaulting a police officer and the burglary of a police station.

But that was then. Today his biggest fan is Kemi Badenoch, who came out fighting for him when it was revealed this week that he’d been selected by the Conservatives to contest a council election in Somerset. Badenoch, normally (she says) sceptical about rehabilitation, decided that Bonehill-Paine had turned over a new leaf and should be allowed to stand.

“Piling on them and trying to get them cancelled may be sport for other parties, but this is a different Conservative Party,” she said.

It was an odd hill for Badenoch to die on and, unsurprisingly enough, Bonehill-Paine promptly decided to cancel himself. He stepped down as the candidate but then announced that he had been given a new role advising Badenoch on combatting extremism. Berger described the appointment as an insult. Well, where to start?

Giving people a second chance in life can certainly be a good thing. If only Badenoch had welcomed Keir Starmer’s decision to allow Louise Haigh a second chance when he appointed her transport secretary in 2024 despite her conviction for fraud by false misrepresentation ten years earlier.

But, no. Badenoch savaged Starmer in the House of Commons. “This country needs conviction politicians, not politicians with

convictions," she snapped. Nice soundbite, but no rehabilitation for Haigh.

When confronted with disgusting racism within her own party, Badenoch has sometimes given the impression of being confused. You may remember the row over a Tory donor, Frank Hester, who said that Diane Abbott made him "want to hate all black women" and that she "should be shot." (He has said that he "accepts that he was rude about Diane Abbot in a private meeting several years ago but his criticism had nothing to do with her gender nor colour of skin.")

Mr Hester had given the Tories £10m, and some unkind people suggested the money should be returned – doubtless a ticklish moment for the Conservative Party. Should they cancel Hester, or give him a second chance?

Badenoch, then business secretary, declared the remarks to be racist. But within a few days she dismissed the row over his remarks as "pure media bubble speculation. It is not what the country cares about. This is trivia… we need to get to a place where we stop chasing people around and looking everywhere for the racism."

> ***Badenoch would surely win more friends by being less doctrinaire and more welcoming to the other so-called 'sinners' who have been cast out and remain in the wilderness.***

The £10m was safe. Hester got a second chance. Perhaps he could join Bonehill-Paine in advising the Tory leader on fighting extremism?

But this is only the start of the confusion about what kind of party Badenoch is trying to shape. For the other hill on which Badenoch has chosen to die is net zero.

Most polling suggests that nearly two-thirds of us (around 60 per cent) support the UK's commitment to reach net zero by 2050. Almost half of people identifying as Tories (48 per cent) support it, albeit in a lukewarm fashion.

But – even as Southern Europe went up in flames – Badenoch reaffirmed her moratorium on any candidate who does not sign up to her pledge to scrap the net zero targets her predecessor, Theresa May, agreed to in June 2019.

Reasonable people might agree there is a debate to be had about net zero and whether 2050 is a realistic timescale. But not in Badenoch's Tory party. That debate has been cancelled.

You may or may not admire Grant Shapps, who held no fewer than six cabinet roles under successive prime ministers, but it is odd, to say the least, that Badenoch has reportedly banned him from standing again because he disagrees with her over net zero (and, probably, exiting the European Court of Human Rights).

The same fate has apparently befallen (Lord) Gavin Barwell, an affable and popular former Downing Street chief of staff under May. Barwell tweeted some mild criticism over Badenoch's ban on net zero advocates. He found out that he had been kicked out of the Conservative Party in the Lords when a friend forwarded an article to that effect from the *Daily Mail*.

"The decision to take the Whip away from me suggests an intolerance of criticism," he posted on LinkedIn. "During my 30 years working for the party, I served John Major, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith, Michael Howard, David Cameron and Theresa May. None of them would have removed the Whip from a colleague simply for being critical of the strategy they were pursuing."

"The best leaders are those who welcome different voices, not letting unfair attacks bother them but acknowledging and

learning from valid criticism. No one has a monopoly of wisdom."

He's right, isn't he? But the Conservative Party, which used to pride itself on being a broad church, has become rather addicted to cancel culture. It began with Boris Johnson, who had the authoritarian cheek to presume that he, not Michael Heseltine, understood the conservative tradition in this country. Hezza was cancelled.

Within months, a host of other mainstream conservative MPs were heading for the exit door. Such dangerously extreme figures as Ken Clarke, Philip Hammond, Oliver Letwin, Nicholas Soames and Ed Vaizey were kicked out for opposing a no-deal Brexit. There's little doubt that history will judge they were right on this issue – but, meh.

Could Badenoch not have found it in her heart to forge a rapprochement with Hezza, now 93? Or find some warm words for the still-cancelled David Gauke or Dominic Grieve?

Would it not be canny politics to invite former MPs Rory Stewart or Matthew Parris in for a coffee and, while acknowledging their differences, insist that they are all broadly pointing in the same direction?

The truth is, she can't. Is it obstinacy? Insecurity? Arrogance? Narrow-mindedness? Who can say. But it must be dismaying to a large swathe of instinctively centre-right voters who find themselves politically homeless.

It's especially odd since pollsters seem to agree that the "disillusioned centre" should be fertile ground: voters who are not in love with traditional left-wing economic policies, but who also feel alienated by populist social conservatism, green-transition scepticism and hard-line anti-immigration rhetoric.

It’s obviously sensible for Badenoch to distance herself from Reform. But to denounce them, as she did this week, as “woke” is just silly. It got her a headline in the dull days of a parched summer. But most people would think that “being woke” is the least of Nigel Farage’s problems just now.

There is more joy in heaven, and so on. Badenoch claims to have seen genuine repentance in Joshua Bonehill-Paine. But she would surely win more friends by being less doctrinaire and more welcoming to the other so-called “sinners” who have been cast out and remain in the wilderness.

Back to top ⤒

Voices

Hollywood is staging its most dramatic comeback story yet – its own

As Netflix shares slide and blockbusters boom, it is streaming platforms that are suddenly struggling, says **James Moore**. What gives?

Tom Holland in his Spiderman costume, dressed for billion-dollar success *(Marvel)*

Optimism is back on screens. Cinemas are set to record their best year in terms of global box office since 2019, just before the pandemic.

There are in fact already as many billion-dollar-grossing movies halfway through this year (four) as there were in

the whole of 2025, and more than in 2024 (three), 2023 (two), 2022 (three), 2021 (one).

Some context is required: there were nine in 2019. There are some big releases to come, but I rather doubt 2026 is going to climb that particular hill. Still, there is good reason for cheer in Tinseltown.

This is driven by the fact that the public will turn out for the right film. And the cinema habit can be addictive, despite the fact that today's prices can be fierce if you don't take up a membership subscription. So there's that, too. Better still is that it is young people who are fuelling the recovery, not their parents. During Covid, a narrative took hold that cinema was doomed. Streaming and the pandemic had combined to drive a stake into its heart. Tech-savvy younger people will not be back, the doomsayers warned.

But today it might be the streamers that have more to worry about. Netflix, the lone "pure-play" entertainment giant on Wall Street (meaning its model is entirely concentrated in streaming and not, say, theme parks), has seen its shares lose nearly 40 per cent of their value over the last 12 months. Revenue growth has slowed, and competition has never been so intense, particularly from free services such as YouTube and TikTok.

But back to the good news. It is clear that the "loneliest generation" has found that cinema can offer something streaming can't: connection. You can go in a gang or a two or three or four. Movies are better on the big screen, and the collective experience further enhances their appeal.

It's not so much fun for the bean counters, and those with decision-making power.

It perhaps says something that loneliness is precisely what the latest Spiderman flick, a stunning success that will surely top the end-of-year charts, is about. Its plot centres on the struggles of the wall crawler's alter ego Peter Parker as he grapples with life without his friends, who had their memories wiped of him in the previous outing. I spy a lurking metaphor that explains why so many have connected with the movie. Renowned American critic Roger Ebert memorably described cinema as "the empathy machine". Case closed?

Hollywood's sometimes doltish execs (I won't touch on the scandals here) must wish they could bottle that. Another billion-dollar-grossing flick, *Toy Story 5*, comes from a franchise that also centres on issues of friendship, loneliness, loss and the struggles of growing up. There is some of that theme running through the *Odyssey*, also featuring Spidey star Tom Holland among its galaxy of stars. Christopher Nolan's epic is also tailor-made for the biggest screen possible.

We shouldn't overegg this. *Super Mario* was a technicolour sugar rush for the kids. If you're a parent, you probably put up with it for their sake (believe me, I've been there). As for pop biopic Michael, in its favour was the multi-cultural and cross-generational appeal of the music. The less said about its ignoring the elephant in the room (the disturbing allegations that dogged that later part of Michael Jackson's life), the better.

The success of original intellectual property in small budget horror films *Obsession* and *Backrooms*, meanwhile, has to be good for those of us who like seeing originality and creativity when they visit the cinema.

It's not so much fun for the bean counters, and those with decision-making power.

They're not exactly famed for their empathy or the emotional connectivity that has driven the apparent revival in the fortunes

of their medium when compared to the streamers.

Now that it seems cinemas aren’t just alive, but also kicking.

Back to top ⤒

Meta's mega-fine is a turning point in the battle to control Zuckerberg and the tech bros

Meta's vast wealth – and governments' uncertainty about regulating social media – have led it to be overconfident. But, writes **Chris Blackhurst**, the hubris of the tobacco industry should have warned them about what happens when injury hits a tipping point

'For all their cockiness, Zuckerberg and his chums may soon find themselves running out of road' *(Getty)*

Pretty much everything you know about Mark Zuckerberg suggests he does hubris and denial on a grand scale. There must come a point, though, when even the mighty tech bro is forced to concede that he is wrong and others are right.

Based on Meta's official response to the judgement in New Mexico against his social media behemoth, it has not been reached. The US judge ordered Meta to pay $567m (£421m) for failing to warn the public about the dangers its platforms pose to children.

Said Zuckerberg's company: "We disagree with the ruling and will appeal." Its statement added: "We work hard to keep people safe on our platforms and have been transparent about the challenges of identifying and removing bad actors and harmful content. We remain confident in our record of protecting teens online and will continue to defend ourselves against claims that misrepresent the facts."

This, after Judge Bryan Biedscheid described Meta as a "public nuisance" akin to air pollution and compared the firm to a factory with advertising and content as its product and "the psychological harm and sexual exploitation of children to be the pollution that must be abated".

This too, after the previous fining of Meta in the New Mexico case of $375m.

Still, Meta professes not to be bothered. Rather like the defiant, unrepentant teenager who shrugs and utters that phrase, they should be – and perhaps, this time, they are.

Courts and those in authority railing against Meta and its ilk are not new, not least in the EU. It's true as well, the sum is the equivalent of a fly irritating an elephant. Or, as Bruce Daisley, a former European vice president of Twitter, now X, said, the New Mexico fine was "a drop in the ocean" for Meta. After all, it has

just posted revenues for the three months from April to June of $61bn, a rise of 28 per cent on the same quarter last year.

Daisley, though, went on to say: “But it's an indication that we are moving to a stage where social media is going to be tackled around the world.”

The New Mexico verdict represented the first occasion a US state has successfully sued the corporation over child safety issues. In Los Angeles, Meta lost a lawsuit earlier this year when it was found liable for building addictive platforms. Then, a jury agreed with a woman known as Kaley that Meta, which owns Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp, and Google, owner of YouTube, intentionally built addictive social media platforms that harmed the 20-year old's mental health. She was awarded $6m (£4.5m) in damages.

It was also met with the typical reaction from Meta and Google that they disagreed and would appeal. Nevertheless, it too was hailed as a landmark, encouraging hundreds of similar actions wending their way through the US courts.

Apart from adding to the massive workload of Meta’s lawyers, the New Mexico ruling could be interpreted, as Zuckerberg chooses to insist, as more of the same.

It’s not; it’s different. That’s because this is not an individual suing Meta, but a state. Currently, 36 state attorneys across the US are pursuing his organisation for violating child privacy laws. New Mexico is just the first, on Meta’s home turf, in Donald Trump’s America.

Suddenly, Zuckerberg and his competitor pals lining up behind Trump at his inauguration seem diminished. Like it or not and despite their apparent mateyness with the president, they are on the rack.

What will have rocked them is a judge for the first time as well likening one of their number to a public nuisance. Judge Biedscheid also decreed that part of the money should be used to fund treatment programmes to correct the harm Meta has already caused, and he further determined a raft of mandatory safety measures.

Meta and its legal eagles should not need reminding that we've been here before. For three decades, tobacco companies were hit by action after action by individual smokers alleging cigarettes had caused lung cancer. The manufacturers won on every single count.

But then the tide turned. That was when the state governments sued to recover their Medicaid costs. Their efforts culminated in the historic 1998 US Master Settlement Agreement, under which they agreed to pay vast sums and for their products to be subjected to marketing restrictions, including publishing meaningful warnings on packets.

Countries and overseas lawyers, emboldened by the US example, took up the challenge, with the result that the industry was battered worldwide.

Britain has been behind the US when it comes to group lawsuits – they are not really our thing – and our government has been nervous of tackling the tech giants head-on. We've still wanted to attract their investment and we wished to avoid upsetting UK-US diplomatic relations.

That might also be about to change. The former safeguarding minister Jess Phillips indicates the US example may persuade the UK to take a more robust approach. For all their cockiness, Zuckerberg and his chums may soon find themselves running out of road.

Back to top ⤒

Best cash ISAs and savings accounts in August paying highest interest rates

Earning over 4 per cent while inflation remains elevated is a must to protect your cash

Karl Matchett Business and money editor

At Hargreaves Lansdown, an ISA is now offered through Shawbrook paying 4.52 per cent *(Getty/iStock)*

Interest rates remained higher in 2026 and, while that can be frustrating for homeowners looking to renew mortgages, it's great news for savers.

Higher interest rates among banks, building societies and other finance providers mean better competition and more choices for consumers.

It is important not to leave cash sat in current or savings accounts, where earnings are low or non-existent, as inflation is

still close to 3 per cent and likely to head higher over the year, which will erode the spending power of your cash if your interest rate is not above it.

Thankfully, many providers outside the high street names are offering interest rates well in excess of 4 per cent right now, so if you haven't already done so, move your money to a better place – just always remember to check the account conditions suit your needs.

Here are the highest-paying easy access savings accounts, cash ISAs and fixed-term saver options in August, with rates correct at the time of writing. All rates are AER (annual equivalent rate) for easier comparison.

Best cash ISAs in August

There's a new market leader just now for easy access cash ISAs - which, as a reminder, are merely savings accounts you don't pay tax on the interest in.

Sidekick have launched a 4.66 per cent account, but while like most accounts at present that rate includes a bonus, it is worth noting that the bonus is both a little larger than others and also lasts less time. The 1.43 per cent bonus lasts for six months; afterwards you therefore return to the variable 3.23 per cent rate, which wouldn't be competitive - you'd need to mark your calendars and move money once the bonus expires, if you want to keep earning a top rate. On the plus side, this is a flexible ISA – money taken out and put back in during the same tax year doesn't count twice against your annual allowance.

If you don't want to switch up after six months, the usual names remain in the frame for top ISA rates, which are competitive and frequently changing by small amounts, so double-check before you open one.

At Hargreaves Lansdown, an ISA is now offered through Shawbrook paying 4.52 per cent, though it is worth noting HL can alter the variable rate at short notice, not just when the Bank of England moves the Bank Rate. You must open an account online, through the HL website.

With Trading 212. There, you can get 4.51 per cent including a bonus by using a code from *The Independent*. Again, it's a flexible ISA, the bonus lasts for 12 months and there are no fees.

And finally, Chip is offering 4.41 per cent for new customers, including a 12-month bonus. Again, it is flexible. Money in the Chip ISA is held with Lloyds, Barclays and other banks. You must open an account via the app.

Remember, all variable rates track the Bank of England's base rate, so if that moves, so too does your overall rate, even if there's a bonus on top.

Best easy access accounts in August

In the past couple of weeks, the UK savings market has witnessed the return of the 5 per cent accounts – and if you're eligible for one, you might as well open one!

Revolut's 5 per cent offering has now left the market, but you can still open a Cahoot Sunny Saver which gives 5 per cent on balances up to £3,000. You can choose to have the interest paid monthly or at the end of a full year, and you can make withdrawals if you need to. Cahoot is owned by Santander.

In addition, Lemfi, a fintech initially set up to help immigrants move or send money, is also offering 5 per cent – though it only lasts for six months, then lowers to 3.04 per cent. Cash with them is held by ClearBank, an FSCS-protected and regulated bank.

Beyond those market toppers, Chase is at 4.5 per cent if you open a current account, while Tembo offers 4.55 per cent, which

actually gives you an additional 1 per cent bonus if you use your savings (and their mortgage service) to buy a house with.

Best fixed-term bonds in August

Fixed-term accounts, or bonds, offer a trade-off: you get certainty of your rate not changing even if the BoE lowers the base rate, but in return you can't usually access your cash until the period has finished.

For one-year fixes, OakNorth are currently offering the top rate at 4.86 per cent, while for a two-year fix it's Tandem at 4.7 per cent which is the best rate on offer.

For longer than this, it's possible to get 5 per cent on three- and even five-year terms, but you should consider whether investing some of your money may be better instead if you are locking it away for long periods, as investing can give better returns than just cash over the long term.

Back to top ⤒

We need strong banks, not a levy on success. Burnham must rule out taxes

Banks are unpopular, but remain an engine of economic growth. A windfall tax may be tempting – but it risks weakening the institutions Britain needs to invest and grow, says **James Moore**

Britain's top banks have enjoyed a bumper first half of 2026 *(Photos Getty)*

Andy Burnham's "good growth in every postcode" is one of the lamest political slogans I've heard. Yet beneath the clunky phrase lies a sound political and economic idea. If the prime minister can get the economy motoring, people will feel happier. They'll be open to spending a little money. Businesses will see that confidence and invest. They will hire more staff, reducing unemployment and cutting the benefits bill. Populists from left and right will start to look less attractive.

Here's an uncomfortable truth – at least for some. To secure that, he needs strong, profitable banks, with the capacity and willingness to take risks by lending money to businesses, particularly smaller ones, supporting the economy in the process.

Banks are the power stations that fuel growth. Of course, growth also requires a sensible and effective government, a stable trading environment and more besides. But banks are a key element – one that Britain currently has.

And how. The banking industry is coming off a bravura results season, reporting billions of pounds in profit, fattening their shareholders' pockets with chunky dividends and generous share buyback plans. Campaigners have taken note, with calls for windfall taxes. And they are reportedly on the table.

Positive Money, a non-profit organisation which advocates for reform of the financial system, thinks it could raise £19bn for Burnham and his chancellor John Healey. The big four – Barclays, Lloyds, HSBC and NatWest/RBS – made £29.2bn in the first half of the year, up 21 per cent, much of which has gone to their shareholders. QED.

Credit to Positive Money: it is smarter than the average pressure group. There is clearly some thought behind its proposal, which

has garnered a great deal of attention with Healey's first Budget looming.

Its proposal is targeted only at banks' UK profits. International operations, including Barclays' Wall Street arm and the Asian businesses that power HSBC, would be left untouched.

There are many who look with hungry eyes at Barclays' wins from playing dice in the financial casino in particular. Why not grab a piece of that for the NHS while we're at it?

The Royal Bank of Scotland needed a £20bn payment to prevent its collapse after the 2008 banking crisis

Positive Money is clever enough to understand that this would be entirely counterproductive. For a start, it would plunge a dagger into the fluttering heart of the City. Such a proposal would see Barclays swiftly restructuring its operations to make the plan much harder to execute.

It could spin off the investment bank, ship itself off to Wall Street, or even look for a merger partner. Rich businesses have options, just as rich people do. But is a tax on the UK profits of these banks any better?

For a start, if I were the board of HSBC, I might be inclined to give up on the UK as a bad job, casting it adrift and taking my Asian businesses to Hong Kong.

To be clear: I abhor HSBC's habit of using this as a threat whenever it dislikes some aspect of government policy. But if part of your operation is getting clobbered every time it sails into sunny weather, it becomes less a threat and more a pragmatic choice.

Britain's politicians have long made a virtue of how attractive the country is to overseas investors, and rightly so. I am talking here about money coming in to create businesses or fund projects, rather than takeovers of UK companies, which are sometimes wrongly included in the figures.

It is very welcome. Unfortunately, the UK is currently a slow-growing market. The threat of windfall taxes could turn it into a deeply unattractive one, entrenching that weakness. It is a cliche that such levies would cut investment and reduce lending. But it also happens to be true.

As for all that shareholder largesse? Well, yes. That's what businesses are supposed to offer. And if you have a pension, you benefit from it too.

Past windfall taxes, such as the Blair government's levy on privatised utilities, were more justified. They had been sold off too cheaply and were soaking the consumer. We're living with the consequences of the water industry, in particular, having been given far too much leeway since then.

> ***Defending banks that have been making more money than God is not a particularly comfortable place in which to find myself***

I would put the banking levy, imposed after the financial crisis, when losses were socialised and billions of pounds of taxpayers' cash was poured into the industry to keep it afloat, in the same category. Payment was due. Call it interest on a very big loan.

But today's proposed bank "windfall" tax looks more like a tax on success, which is much harder to justify. It is not as if the taxpayer doesn't share in those profits through corporation tax, business rates and so on.

Bankers' bonuses are often tasteless, sometimes outright appalling. But we tax them too, and post-crisis they are subject to clawback if things go wrong. In other words, the more the banks make, the more the taxpayer makes. And the more capacity and willingness there is to lend into the economy while we're at it.

Defending banks that have been making more money than God is not a particularly comfortable place in which to find myself. I've seen the dark side of the industry, and I've met and spent time with a lot of bad bankers.

I lived through the financial crisis and reported on the scandals coughed up in its wake. They were ugly. They explain why people are so ready to support this sort of idea. They are also something the banking industry needs to reflect upon.

None of this changes the fact that a windfall tax would be counterproductive at best. Strong banks make for a strong economy. Weak banks are a recipe for disaster. The fact that Britain's banks are in the former category is an asset to the nation. Burnham needs to see them as partners – not targets – if he wants to achieve his aims.

The government absolutely should take every penny in tax it is due, but it shouldn't capriciously add to the burden. Not if it wants that "good growth".

Back to top

The cold truth behind Salah's move to the fourth-biggest club in Turkey

Mohamed Salah will be something of an incongruous sight at Trabzonspor, writes **Richard Jolly**, but his joining football's growing, lucrative retirement home does at least offer intrigue

Mohamed Salah was mobbed upon arrival in Istanbul on Wednesday *(AP)*

The path to the pitch in Turkey may have begun on the bench in Turkey. Two months before Mohamed Salah signalled the end of his Liverpool FC career with the explosive outburst in which he claimed he had been thrown under the bus came the first indication that he had lost his status as an automatic choice.

Salah was benched for the Champions League defeat to Galatasaray in September. His cameo was notable for being the first time – albeit only for six minutes – that Alexander Isak, Florian Wirtz, Hugo Ekitike and the Egyptian were on the field together. Arne Slot's starting 11, though, formed the prelude to Salah's dropping in November. And, indirectly, to his return to Turkey, to join Trabzonspor, to the euphoric reception he received at Istanbul airport on Wednesday.

It is not only recency bias that indicates Salah will be the most spectacular signing in Trabzonspor's history. Perhaps it is cruel, though, to reflect how far his fortunes have declined in a year. In the summer of 2025, fresh from a season in which he scored 29 Premier League goals and recorded 18 assists, his availability on a free transfer would surely have brought a more prestigious suitor than Turkey's fourth-biggest club.

The Egyptian forward's move to Trabzonspor is a stark drop-off from Liverpool *(Reuters)*

Nevertheless, Salah in Turkey offers intrigue. He will be an incongruous sight in a team featuring Sidny Lopes Cabral, the Cape Verdean scorer of the goal of the World Cup, the exiled and erratic Andre Onana, and "tall Paul" Onuachu, briefly of Southampton but prolific in Belgium and Turkey; but few players of the calibre of his former Liverpool teammates.

His presence could be seen as part of a shift from east to west, of how, as with Salah's reported salary of €17m a year, Turkish clubs are able to outbid some of their French, Spanish, German and Italian counterparts for players; their league already includes Victor Osimhen, Ilkay Gundogan, Leroy Sane, Ederson and Leandro Trossard. Yet only Osimhen is under 30, and Turkey is developing a reputation as a lucrative retirement home for the footballing elderly.

While Salah felt himself mistreated by Arne Slot at Anfield last season, Liverpool's peers did not sign him. It is thought the Egyptian's camp approached his old employers at Roma; minus a move to the traditional elite, it is hard to escape the conclusion that they feel his best days are, suddenly, far behind him.

The relationship between Salah and Arne Slot had deteriorated as the season went on *(PA)*

Perhaps his most recent display against a Turkish side indicates he could still be a force in the Super Lig, though. Salah rewound time for a glorious quarter of an hour, eviscerating Galatasaray at Anfield in March. It may bode well for his time at Trabzonspor. Yet the subsequent tie against Paris Saint-Germain, where he was sadly ineffectual, has the potential to prove his last ever in the Champions League; Trabzonspor finished third in the Super Lig last season and should be in the Europa League. Although if they lose a play-off to Ferencvaros or Gornik Zabrze, they will instead end up in the Conference League.

And yet it is notable that Salah chose to stay in European football (if not actually Europe). Sporting Kansas City were rivals for his signature. As the most high-profile Arab footballer in the world, there was long the theory that he would go to Saudi Arabia. Yet, while Al-Ittihad made a £150m bid in 2023, it was right at the end of a summer of Saudi spending, long after earlier targets were pursued; and there has rarely been the sense it was Salah's dream destination, even before war in nearby Iran may have made it less appealing. That Turkey is an Islamic country and

relatively close to Egypt could have swayed his decision, certainly compared to the long distance to Kansas City.

The probability is that Salah's exit from Liverpool has been cushioned by a payoff to compensate for the last year of a lucrative contract. But his huge commercial income was facilitated in part by the profile Liverpool provided; beyond the fanaticism of the Turkish fans, Trabzonspor does not have anywhere near the same pull. It was a reason to wonder whether Salah might have sought a club in one of Europe's top five divisions, or in the Champions League, to maintain a greater prominence.

Andoni Iraola replaced Slot at Liverpool but that didn't prompt a change of heart over Salah *(PA)*

It is also notable that regime change at Anfield did not bring a change of heart from Liverpool. Slot's sacking may have been rendered more likely by some of Salah's words; his Instagram post, a week before the end of the season, calling for a return of "heavy-metal football", may have meant he got his wish when Andoni Iraola was appointed. And yet the May draw against

Brentford remained his last game for the club. It was a sign that Liverpool do not expect the Salah of old to return.

Yet the problem is that, if they probably always knew he was irreplaceable, they still have not replaced him. Realistically, they have had since at least autumn to plan for a summer signing; the rapprochement of sorts in December only ever looked a temporary affair.

But it is now August. Liverpool put together a £100m package for Yan Diomande, but he has instead left RB Leipzig for Real Madrid. And so Salah has his new club, but Liverpool do not have their new Salah.

Back to top ⤒

West Ham's complicated chance for rebirth in the Championship

The pain of relegation and the allegations against co-owner David Sullivan have given way to optimism around a strong squad and a potential regime change, writes **Alex Pattle**

Captain and forward Jarrod Bowen has extended his deal at the London Stadium, while former Newcastle director Amanda Staveley is aiming to buy Sullivan's stake *(Getty)*

The Irons are back in the fire. Yet this time, the fire might not actually be the Championship.

The inaptly named second tier of English football, which is welcoming back West Ham United after a

14-year absence, may simply represent a single flame of the many licking at the east London club.

The other particularly scorching strand to the narrative around the club in 2026, of course, has been the saga involving David Sullivan's exit as chairman after 16 years at the helm.

In June, it was revealed that West Ham had been "made aware of the impending publication of serious historic allegations", leading the billionaire to step down but also deny all claims, which were soon shared in a joint investigation by the BBC's *Panorama* and *The Times*.

The investigation detailed allegations that Sullivan had abused his power as owner of the *Daily Sport* and *Sunday Sport* tabloids to prey on women in their late teens and early twenties, with seven women speaking to the broadcaster and the newspaper about accusations spanning decades, starting in the 1980s. "All come from women who were [...] young models seeking work at Sullivan's *Daily* and *Sunday Sport* newspapers," the BBC reported. "They accuse Sullivan of sexually exploitative and predatory behaviour."

Many fans celebrated Sullivan's resignation, having craved his exit for so long. At the time of writing, however, he is not *truly* gone.

Sullivan resigned as West Ham chairman but retains a stake in the club *(PA)*

Despite his resignation, a warning that he should stay away from men's first-team games in the coming season, and suggestions that he was previously asked to stay away from the women's and youth teams (which he denies), Sullivan remains West Ham's largest shareholder, possessing a 38.8 per cent stake in the Hammers.

But here comes Amanda Staveley, bursting through the doors with a consortium in tow, aiming to buy Sullivan's stake.

The former Newcastle United director agreed last week to buy a 25.1 per cent stake from the family of former co-owner David Gold, who passed away in 2023, for an outlay of £150m.

Yet there is opposition from club co-owner Daniel Kretinsky, a Czech billionaire with a minority stake in West Ham, who could yet have a say in this power struggle.

It feels as though Staveley's involvement has led to equal parts concern and optimism in recent days, which is testament to the complicated opportunity facing West Ham.

Nuno Espirito Santo led Wolves to promotion from the Championship in his first season in charge, five years ago *(PA)*

As the flames continue to lick at the club, it's worth remembering that fire can destroy... but it can also purge and purify.

It was far too easy at the end of the 2025-26 season for fans of other clubs to shrug, to claim that West Ham would come straight back up; it's easy to say if one supports a team that has never endured the stomach-churning reality of the drop. Yet some West Ham fans do feel that relegation can represent a necessary wake-up call, an overdue reset.

Many will remember the joys of the 2011-12 Championship season, the unfamiliar feeling of consistent wins – although a botched, wasted bid to seal automatic promotion led to a nervier climax than was needed. And as West Ham return to the Championship, they do so with a coach in Nuno Espirito Santo who has won that league before.

This curious appetite among the fanbase has been represented by the number 50,000 – the approximate number of season tickets sold for the coming campaign – and even the number of

tickets sold for today's first-round Carabao Cup clash with Portsmouth.

Optimism has also been augmented by a promising start to the transfer window, which saw West Ham lock down captain Jarrod Bowen and bring in a combined £148m by selling Mateus Fernandes, Crysencio Summerville and Freddie Potts.

Midfielder Tomas Soucek is injured but could still play a key part in the upcoming season *(Getty)*

A counterconcern, of course, might be the lack of signings since then, aside from defender Joel Veltman from Brighton, although staples of last year's squad have been retained.

At the time of writing, goalkeepers Alphonse Areola and Mads Hermansen remain on the books; Aaron Wan-Bissaka, Konstantinos Mavropanos, Jean-Clair Todibo and Kyle Walker-Peters are still available in defence; Tomas Soucek and Edson Alvarez persist in midfield; and forwards Taty Castellanos and Pablo should be champing at the bit to put a dent in second-tier opposition.

Some of these talents could depart between now and the Championship opener at Burnley on 16 August, but at least they would yield further funds for investment before the 3 September transfer deadline – or in the January window, should West Ham stutter in their bid for an instant return to the top tier. The club has suggested that any uncertainty around its hierarchy will not impact transfer dealings, although that does remain to be seen.

So, the Irons are back in the fire. There, perhaps, they can forge something stronger for the future.

West Ham vs Portsmouth, kick-off 3pm, live on Sky Sports+

Back to top ⤒

The game's 'greatest rivalry' is about to go back to the future

The upcoming four-Test series between South Africa and New Zealand will attempt to create a new commercial success story with an international tour based on old lines. **Harry Latham-Coyle** explains the rich history and off-field conflicts that deepen the contest

Respect of warriors: Ardie Savea and Siya Kolisi will lead their sides in the upcoming Test matches *(Getty)*

They are known as “The Incomparables”, a nickname to daunt a group of successors to whom they will find themselves inevitably compared. When Dave Rennie unveiled his New Zealand squad for the tour of South Africa, present were a selection of the 1996 All Blacks who, 30 years ago, conquered the reigning world champion Springboks in their own backyard and launched rugby union’s professional age. Three decades on, the echoes of that series still sound; again, this much-anticipated meeting of men’s rugby’s two ruling powers carries with it a significance beyond simply the sport at its centre.

For while four Tests between the southern hemisphere heavyweights whet the appetite, this is as much a venture born out of mutual commercial benefit as any great demand for more meetings between the pair. Indeed, there is a degree of rankling resentment at the manner in which the two unions have broken away from the Rugby Championship, a competition that has found new life in recent years. But these encounters, titled “Rugby’s Greatest Rivalry”, carry all the hallmarks of that term – genuine history, genuine hostility, genuine best-of-the-best feel.

“With eight matches in six weeks, including a four-Test series against the Springboks, this would have to be the toughest tour in rugby,” All Blacks coach Dave Rennie said. “Every player will be required to play their part across this tour, whether it’s preparing to play or helping their mates prepare.

New Zealand's 'Incomparables' beat South Africa in 1996

"It will be an intense seven weeks of touring but an excellent opportunity for us to pit ourselves against the current benchmark team in world rugby, and to build connections with each other in a way that only a tour of this scale can do."

There will be touring teams of old that may scoff at the schedule facing the All Blacks, but this is a gruelling itinerary for modern times. New Zealand will criss-cross the Rainbow Nation with four games against the United Rugby Championship (URC) franchises interspersed among four fully-fledged Tests, with half of each played at altitude. They will not need reminding of the strength and depth of South African rugby, or the hunger of those on the fringes to force their way into Springboks contention.

All Blacks coach Dave Rennie has called it ‘the toughest tour in rugby’

Still, though, it feels as if these All Blacks have plenty to prove. There were encouraging early signs at the start of the Rennie regime in July’s Nations Championship fixtures, but New Zealand are clearly playing catch-up after two ultimately wasted years under Scott Robertson. An initial evolution is clear – more ball in play, less kicking, more expression – but one can easily fall back on bad habits against a side like South Africa. Successive sides and successive head coaches have been destabilised by galling days against the Springboks: Mbombela in 2022; Twickenham in 2023; Wellington, most strikingly, last year. Five of the last six meetings, including the World Cup final, have gone South Africa’s way.

There is a difference here from 1996: then, South Africa’s World Cup success a year prior had felt a shock sprung in part by a unique confluence of political and personal motivation. Now, the Springboks are clearly the world’s best, and at the forefront of rugby’s orthodoxy – a position occupied by their tourists for most of the last three decades. It can be seen in the boardrooms and backrooms that govern the game.

Senior figures at World Rugby have noted that at their most recent “Shape of the Game” conference in southwest London, it was Rassie Erasmus to whom the room generally looked when the Springboks supremo was present; Felix Jones, his whip-smart assistant and key lieutenant, has also been described as a prominent voice of late.

South Africa defeated New Zealand 12-11 in the last Rugby World Cup final

A strong delegation from the South African hierarchy was out in force in March for that conference amid suggestions of a push to de-power the scrum and maul from other areas of the game. World Rugby denied any such talks taking place – and a key takeaway from the conference was a moratorium of sorts on the type of rule-tweaking and tinkering that has been too common within the sport – but a slight schism over the future has opened up.

Where South Africa and France, particularly, boast relative buoyancy at Test and domestic level, Australia and New Zealand perhaps feel rugby union is under greater duress, with the continuing threat of the National Rugby League’s largesse again creating headlines in the Pacific in recent weeks. More than 30

years since the dawn of professionalism, rugby union is still figuring out how best to sell itself.

It is notable that Mark Robinson, the former CEO of NZ Rugby, has stepped into an overarching role with the global governing body as the organisation sets a subtly different direction over a crucial period leading up to two World Cups in the United States – the men's in 2031 and the women's in 2033.

New Zealand's Rieko Ioane evades the tackle of Jonathan Roche during last night's 38-21 win over the Stormers in Cape Town *(Reuters)*

This is a key series in that regard, with the fourth Test held in Baltimore – a city likely to be a strong contender to host games at those tournaments. Commercially, there is significance here, too, with the Springboks known to be keen to build their global brand in a manner similar to the All Blacks'. As previously detailed, though, NZ Rugby is not necessarily flush with cash – for each nation, four marquee and lucrative Tests like these are timely.

The tour kicked off last night with an unconvincing display against the Stormers, who were holding the All Blacks at 14-14

with a quarter of an hour to go, before four tries saw the visitors pull clear to record a 38-21 victory. It was perhaps fitting that this first match took place in Cape Town: New Zealand boast significant support in the city dating back to the days of apartheid, when many from the Cape Coloured community turned away from the all-white Springboks.

A shared kinship was further established during the 1981 South Africa tour to New Zealand, which was met with strong anti-apartheid protests that divided the usually peaceful Pacific nation. Into that rich historical tapestry, more thread is about to be woven.

The first Test between South Africa and New Zealand will be played at Ellis Park, Johannesburg, on 22 August

Back to top ⤒

Sports news in brief

Lise Klaveness, head of the Norwegian FA, says there is 'no trust' in the under-pressure Fifa president *(Reuters)*

'No way back for Infantino,' warns Norway

Norway's football federation has intensified pressure on Fifa president Gianni Infantino, demanding his immediate resignation following his failed plan to sell World Cup stakes. Lise Klaveness, president of the Norwegian federation, confirmed her organisation's stance after a meeting on Thursday, citing a complete loss of confidence. "We decided that there is no trust in Infantino now," Klaveness told *The Guardian*. "We have been worried consistently and there has been one more step in worrying direction every year, every part of the year. The trust is now gone for us, there is no way back for Infantino."

This marks the latest blow for Infantino, with repercussions continuing from his contentious proposal to commercialise

World Cup profits via the Fifa Forward Enterprise (FFE). European football's governing body, Uefa, reiterated its threat to boycott the World Cup and other Fifa competitions on Thursday, despite Fifa abandoning the failed scheme. It also reaffirmed its lost confidence in Infantino.

Earlier this week, Infantino appeared to have averted an internal revolt during a summit in Rabat, Morocco, with Fifa claiming he received full staff support. The Confederation of African Football (Caf) voiced its support for him on Thursday, while Mexico and Argentina are also backing the Fifa chief to continue in his role. Concacaf and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) called out Infantino for his failed sell-off plan last week, with the proposal eventually scrapped last Friday. *AP*

City explore Fernandez deal as Rodri bid rejected

Manchester City are exploring a move for Enzo Fernandez in light of Rodri's expected move to Barcelona. The Spanish champions offered €45m (£38.7m) for Spain's World Cup-winning captain, which City do not deem a serious price for the Ballon d'Or winner. No meaningful talks have taken place between the clubs yet, with City reluctant to enter negotiations until there is the prospect of a deal near their valuation of the midfielder.

Chelsea midfielder Fernandez is highly rated by new boss Enzo Maresca, who worked with the Argentine during his time at Stamford Bridge before succeeding Pep Guardiola this summer at the Etihad Stadium. The 25-year-old was suspended last season after statements made concerning his future, having joined the Blues for £106m in 2023.

Chelsea still value the player in the region of £120m, which could put off suitors, despite a fine season amid chaos at Stamford Bridge, with 16 goals and nine assists in all competitions. Should, as expected, Real Madrid miss out on

Rodri, then Fernandez could also emerge as an alternative target for Jose Mourinho's new-look side.

Arsenal eye new targets after Vinicius Jr move fails

Arsenal intend to hold their nerve and assess alternative options after missing out on Vinicius Jr, with the Real Madrid superstar signing a contract extension at the Bernabeu on Thursday. Mikel Arteta is still eager to bring in a new left winger, with three notable options still on the table. An agreement was close on personal terms, but the 26-year-old ultimately opted to commit his future to Madrid in a deal until 2032.

Atletico Madrid's Julian Alvarez is admired by Arteta, but the Argentine striker has also been linked with Barcelona and looks poised to remain in Spain either way. Bradley Barcola is another attractive option, with Liverpool also keen on the Paris Saint-Germain winger. The Premier League champions are playing catch-up to some extent though, with Liverpool thought to be further down the line in terms of negotiations over personal terms. PSG's valuation could also prove a stumbling block, with the France international priced by his club at £130m, a figure above the Gunners' own valuation.

Arsenal have also considered Everton's Iliman Ndiaye, who was strongly linked with a move to the Saudi Pro League club earlier this summer. The Senegal international, 26, hit six goals for the Toffees last year and scored against Iraq at this summer's World Cup. Meanwhile, the club are on the verge of signing Brazil international Bruno Guimaraes from Newcastle. A £75m deal for the central midfielder will reduce a reliance on Declan Rice and set up one of the strongest midfields in the Premier League.

Flintoff steps down from England Lions

Andrew Flintoff has stepped down as head coach of the England Lions as the coaching upheaval at the ECB continues. Flintoff,

one of England's greatest all-rounders, had spent nearly two years in charge of the second-string side after being persuaded into coaching by Rob Key, the ECB's managing director of men's cricket. Well liked by the players, Flintoff had drawn plaudits for his work in developing some of the brightest young talents in England, but is due to take up a new role with the Sydney Thunder in Australia's Big Bash this winter.

In a statement yesterday, Flintoff said: "Not only have I enjoyed my time having the opportunity to work with the best young cricketers in the country, but I have taken great pride in seeing them develop. I'd like to thank the coaches and staff for all their passion, tireless work and support they give every day. In particular, Ed Barney, who I've loved working with and was so lucky to have as a performance director, and obviously Rob for trusting me with one of the most important roles in English cricket. I can't wait to get started with the Thunder later in the year and see where coaching takes me."

His exit follows the removal of Brendon McCullum as Test head coach, with fellow New Zealander Stephen Fleming appointed. McCullum continues to oversee England's white-ball teams, while Marcus Trescothick is in interim charge of the Test team for the upcoming Pakistan series.

Niewiadoma takes stunning solo victory

Kasia Niewiadoma stormed to her first Tour de France Femmes stage win, and her first stage win at any race in seven years, with a stunning solo victory atop Mont Ventoux and seized the overall lead on a dramatic stage seven. The Pole had been third in the general classification standings going into the "queen stage" of this year's race, with 3,500m of elevation gain across four categorised climbs along the 147km route from La Voulte-sur-Rhone to the legendary Mont Ventoux.

The 2024 champion had been 1min 17sec behind yellow jersey Marlen Reusser, with 2023 winner Demi Vollering second at 12 seconds back and the favourite to win the title this time around. But Canyon-SRAM's Niewiadoma had other ideas, dropping Reusser and Vollering with 9km to go on the 15.7km hors-categorie climb and never looking back, continuing to power up the slope with a grimace on her face as she won by 1'16".

She flung her hands in the air as she crossed the line before nearly grinding to a halt. Behind her, Vollering dropped Reusser on the double-digit gradients of the final kilometre and soloed to second, while Elisa Longo Borghini caught a rapidly fading Reusser in the final 100m and crossed the line third, 1'42" behind, with the Swiss rider four seconds behind her. Vollering remains second in the general classification and just 15 seconds behind Niewiadoma, with Reusser falling to third but still only 39 seconds back.

The race continues today with a 171.9km stage from Sisteron to Nice, and concludes tomorrow with what could yet be the defining stage: an explosive, punchy outing lasting just 99km but encompassing four ascents and descents of the formidable Col d'Eze, with a fast downhill to the line in Nice setting up a dramatic finale.

Back to top ⤒

Britain has an octopus problem – could eating them provide the solution?

Our warming seas are fuelling a boom in the tentacled molluscs, with fishermen catching 77 times more than usual. As they feast on crabs and lobster, **Hannah Twiggs** explores whether putting more of them on our plates will help the struggling industry. Octopus salad, anyone?

Common octopuses are now breeding in Britain's warming waters *(Getty/iStock)*

One day over the summer, the boats unloading at Newlyn fish market brought in 9.5 tonnes of seafood. Nine tonnes of it was octopus. Nobody had slipped a decimal point. Cornwall hadn't briefly relocated to Galicia.

At first, the octopuses appeared to be tourists, lured to the south coast by warmer water and expected to disappear when the temperature dropped. In fact, they had arrived last summer, remained through winter and spring, at times dominating markets in Cornwall and Devon. Fishermen who had set out for lobster hauled their pots back full of tentacles.

For Alex Hunter, founder of the Chelsea fishmonger and restaurant The Sea, The Sea, it captured the scale of a change unfolding off Britain's southwest coast. Hunter buys lobster directly from a young fisherman in Looe, who at the height of the summer was landing around 100kg of octopus a day.

"We thought, we have to do something with this," Hunter tells me, "because we're not getting the full range of species that we normally do."

At The Sea, The Sea, that has meant an octopus and potato salad – its bestselling to-go lunch – and octopus bossam, wrapped in lettuce with seasonal herbs and condiments, which sells out whenever it appears on the specials board.

The proposition is simple. British fishermen are catching extraordinary quantities of octopus while crabs, lobsters and scallops are under pressure. Rather than export almost all of it to countries that already know what to do with eight arms and a beak, eat the octopus, save the crab.

Unfortunately, the sea rarely arranges itself for our convenience.

Dr Bryce Stewart, senior research fellow at the Marine Biological Association and lead author of its work on octopus, says the numbers are "extremely extraordinary, if that's a quantifiable phrase".

"To put it into context, last year the commercial landings of octopus in England were 7,700 per cent up – that's 77 times above normal levels," he tells me. "In the first six months of this

year, they've caught about the same amount as they caught all last year."

Lobster pots have been hauled back in, filled with a few extra tentacles this year and last *(South Devon and Channel Shellfishermen Ltd)*

Blooms, as these events are called, have happened before, most recently in 1950-51 and earlier in 1899-1900. Comparisons are difficult: scuba diving had only just been invented by the Fifties

and nobody was uploading underwater footage from a GoPro in 1900. Even so, “my pretty firm conviction is that this is a much bigger bloom than what has ever been seen before,” says Stewart.

Temperature is the clearest explanation. Previous blooms also coincided with “exceptionally warm years for their time”, though not as warm as Britain’s waters are today. Common octopuses are more familiar in the Mediterranean and off North Africa, but now “we’ve got the conditions that not only allow them to survive and grow well, but to breed,” Stewart explains. “That’s the other big thing”.

Divers recorded females guarding eggs last year. On the morning we speak, Stewart has heard from a scallop diver in Lyme Bay who has been seeing juvenile octopuses only 10-15cm long. “They’ve never been seen here before,” he says. “To see them now is very significant because it basically suggests the whole life cycle is playing out in British waters.”

Stewart believes newly hatched octopuses probably arrived on currents from the Channel Islands or northern France, helped across by easterly winds. Once here, they found plenty of food and a run of mild winters. Earlier blooms are thought to have been ended by severe cold, but Britain has not had a below-average winter for around 15 years.

“When it first happened last year, people were quick to say things like, ‘Oh, it’s just a freak occurrence,’ or, ‘It’s a cycle that happens every 50 to 70 years’,” Stewart says. “We don’t actually know any of that.”

What he is prepared to say is more consequential. “As a scientist, I have to kind of pin my colours to the wall, so my conclusion is they are here to stay.”

That does not mean Newlyn will receive nine tonnes of octopus every week until the end of time. The common octopus lives for around 18 months and dies after breeding, so numbers can rise

and fall dramatically. The juveniles now being seen by divers could be market-sized within months.

7,700%

more octopus caught last year

"We're probably going to have a lull for a bit," says Stewart, "but I wouldn't be surprised if they come back again later in the year or we see the same sort of increases again next spring and summer."

One thing the octopuses are not is invasive, at least in the biological sense. The common octopus is naturally present in the UK, ordinarily in very small numbers.

This matters because "invasive" carries its own moral permission slip. An alien pest can be caught, eaten and preferably eliminated with a clear conscience. A native predator flourishing in more favourable conditions is a more awkward proposition.

Nor did octopus arrive in an untouched shellfish paradise and single-handedly empty it. "Crabs are in trouble already," says Hunter. "We've overfished them and exported too much." Unlike octopus, they prefer cooler water, so marine heatwaves have disrupted normal migration and breeding.

There is, however, strong evidence that the influx is taking a serious toll on lobsters, crabs and scallops. Octopuses are being caught en masse in shellfish pots, surrounded by scallop shells, rocks and seaweed, as though they have moved in, redecorated and ordered room service.

"As a predator, they collect things to eat later. If you look at the scallop shells, you can still see the remnants of scallop flesh," says Stewart. "They put them in there specifically to eat them at their leisure, like a seafood buffet."

The impact does not stop with what octopus eat. Conger eels, seals, blue sharks and Risso's dolphins are eating them in turn. To a seal, Stewart says, an octopus is "like a rump steak".

Female octopuses have been spotted nursing babies – a first for Britain's waters *(Dan Bolt)*

"Everything is in flux," he says. "We've got this new predator that's come in, but then it's providing a food source for even bigger predators."

The economic picture is just as untidy. When the bloom began, many fishermen regarded the octopuses as an enemy to be wiped out, preferably at a profit. Some boats have since made good money landing them. Others have lost valuable shellfish catches without finding enough octopus to compensate.

Now, Stewart says, attitudes are changing. "Because a lot of other species, particularly crabs, are not doing well, I think fishermen are kind of thinking, 'OK, this needs to be part of our future', so that they can continue to fish and earn a living.

“The fear now,” he adds, “is if the octopus suddenly all went, they would have very little left to catch.”

For Hunter, this exposes a deeper failure in Britain’s relationship with its own seafood. “One issue is we export far too much, particularly our native shellfish,” he says. “No one seems to have a handle on it, and no one seems to care about it long term.”

Britain catches a far broader range than it is willing to eat. Much of its shellfish is exported because overseas customers are prepared to pay more – and are more willing to crack open a crab, while people here prefer it picked and reassuringly detached from anything with claws.

“They actually prize our shellfish more than we do,” Hunter says.

> ***Personally, I’m conflicted. I love seafood and I love seeing octopus. I do occasionally eat it but I normally feel a bit conflicted about it***
>
> Bryce Stewart, senior research fellow at the Marine Biological Association

The octopus is now making the reverse journey. Caught in Cornwall and Devon, much of it is sent to southern Europe, where it is an ordinary and cherished ingredient. There is something magnificently inefficient about Britain warming sufficiently to produce Mediterranean quantities of octopus, catching it and sending it back south so the Mediterranean can eat it.

Yet British diners may be harder to persuade, especially now, as the octopus has undergone an image overhaul. *My Octopus Teacher*, the Oscar-winning Netflix documentary, invited viewers into an unusually intimate relationship with one animal. For some, eating octopus afterwards may feel rather like ordering the supporting act.

Stewart understands the ambivalence. “Personally, I’m conflicted,” he says. “I love seafood and I love seeing octopus. I do occasionally eat it but I normally feel a bit conflicted about it.”

But, as a scientist, he struggles to draw a coherent moral boundary between an intelligent octopus and the other sentient animals we routinely eat. “I think it’s not actually different from eating pork or beef or chicken,” he says. “Pigs are thought to be actually very clever, for example.”

Hunter is equally reluctant to draw the moral line. “If I had a very intimate interaction with an octopus it might change my view on eating it,” he says.

Eating more octopus might help fishermen earn money from a changing catch, but there is no evidence that diners could consume enough of it to rescue Britain’s crab and lobster populations.

The more immediate question is whether British octopus can be described as sustainable. The Marine Conservation Society’s Good Fish Guide advises consumers to avoid British-caught octopus. Cornish catches are rated four – “needs improvement” – while those from elsewhere in UK waters receive its lowest rating of five, or “Fish to Avoid”. Abundance alone is not proof that a fishery can support sustained demand.

Once rare in Britain, the common octopus may now be here to stay *(Kirsty Andrews)*

Stewart thinks octopus has the potential to become sustainable seafood because it grows quickly and has a short life cycle. The trouble is that “there’s virtually no management at all of the

octopus fishery". Other countries use closed breeding seasons and permit systems; Britain may need limits on boats, catches and the growing number of pots being laid across the seabed.

"If this is going to become a long-term thing," he says, "then we do need to up our game."

Hunter's answer is not for Britain to gorge on octopus until it disappears. "For me, the biggest solution is to eat a much broader range of fish and seafood," he says. Restaurants should respond to what responsible boats are actually landing, rather than demanding the same handful of species regardless of season or abundance.

"We're not saying everyone needs to eat octopus now," he says. "We're just saying, it's here." When it goes, he adds, they will stop pushing it.

The next decade of British seafood may demand exactly that flexibility. Familiar species will move, decline or become harder to catch. Warmer-water animals will arrive in larger numbers. Fishermen will adapt faster than regulations, while restaurants and shoppers struggle to keep up.

The common octopus, meanwhile, is breeding off the south coast, furnishing lobster pots and feeding dolphins, sharks and seals. It is not waiting for Britain to decide whether it belongs here.

The question is whether we can learn to manage and eat from the sea we now have, rather than the one we remember.

Back to top ⤒

Ukraine is hitting deep inside Russia but don't expect Putin to capitulate

Kyiv is conducting its own campaign against their enemies' infrastructure – but, **Keir Giles** writes, we know by now that Russia's leader is happy to let his country burn

Smoke rises after a Ukrainian attack on a Wildberries warehouse in Krasny Bor *(Social media)*

Russia's war on Ukraine has entered its latest phase, with each side making use of increasing numbers of long-range munitions to strike deep into the other's territory.

In the early summer of this year, there was a surge of optimism across the media when it became clear that Ukraine was stepping up its strikes at enormous ranges into Russia, and there was little that Moscow could do about it. But that optimism needs to be balanced against the new reality that with anti-

missile interceptor systems exhausted, there is not much Ukraine itself can do to blunt Russian missile attacks. For now, those attacks sow misery and death by blasting residential areas with little warning: but next winter, they could once again target heating and power infrastructure and have an even more devastating effect on Ukraine's ability to keep its people alive than last year.

Russia's campaign against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure is not new: it began almost as soon as it became clear that Russia had failed in its initial objective of swiftly overrunning the country in February 2022. But its new character today results both from massive increases in the numbers of missiles and drones available to Russia, and the way they have outstripped Ukraine's air defences.

A crater outside of a Wildberries warehouse in the Moscow region *(Reuters)*

Ukraine's shortages of missile interceptors, particularly the crucial Patriot systems, are well known – and in response, Russia has stepped up its use of ballistic missiles in mass attacks that Ukraine is at times unable to intercept.

Meanwhile, American weapons like Patriot interceptors have been fired off in the US war on Iran in numbers vastly exceeding what has been provided to Ukraine, now reportedly leaving even America's stockpiles almost exhausted.

In fact, at present, Russia produces many more missiles than the collective West produces anti-missile defences. An announcement that the United States would offer Ukraine a licence to produce Patriots domestically also triggered a wave of optimism, which faded swiftly once it was calculated how long this would take to produce results, and the realisation set in that this was in place of, not as well as, ongoing shipments of missiles that are desperately needed today. And even the licensing promise has now been put in doubt.

But it is the reluctance of Ukraine's backers to provide munitions in meaningful numbers, and their determination to place limitations on their use, that has forced Ukraine to swiftly develop its own capabilities to carry out strikes into Russia at enormous ranges, and conduct its own campaign against key economic infrastructure. And Ukraine producing its own weapons systems has meant it is not answerable to foreign sponsors for how they are used, meaning an end to the limitations that in previous years saw the United States banning Ukraine from striking at Russia's oil industries.

In effect, independent weapons production is one of the factors that has seen Ukraine finally emerge as an independent actor in the war, making its own decisions and setting its own terms for resolution of the conflict, rather than being perceived just as a passive victim and a dependent of Western backers.

The latest campaign has seen Ukraine shifting the focus of its attacks from oil refineries to warehouses belonging to Wildberries, a marketplace that accounts for more than half of online retail orders placed in Russia. The surprisingly flammable warehouses contained stock belonging to a huge number of

companies and entrepreneurs making use of Wildberries services, alongside the stockists of military equipment supplying Russia's soldiers at war.

Normal Russians are being impacted as Ukraine's new offensive hits oil refineries *(AFP/Getty)*

The targeting of Wildberries, though, has a wider impact, exacerbating the pressure that had already led to a broader shakeup of the Russian economy, as belts are tightened both to fund the war and to pay for the damage it is inflicting on businesses in Russia.

Russia has taken steps to address the fuel crisis caused by Ukraine's earlier "kinetic sanctions" against the oil refining industry. Those have helped reduce shortages, and the epic queues and outbreaks of violence they sparked; but they cannot address the increased inflation that has fed through to the broader economy as a result of higher fuel prices, with a further cumulative impact on individuals and businesses across the country.

But alongside the economic impact, there is the psychological one. Russians can see for themselves that their country is

incapable of defending their businesses from the victim of Moscow's aggression. And Russia's leaders now have to consider the prospect of eventual peace talks with a victim that can strike into Russia itself at will if and when Moscow violates any ceasefire.

In that respect, the Wildberries campaign is the latest result of a determined long-term programme by Ukraine to develop the ability to bring the war home to Russia's own population, and show them that their country is not just conducting a "special military operation" far away but has embarked on a disastrous misadventure that will have consequences at home too. This can have tragic consequences too, such as the unfortunate incident on Black Sea beach earlier this week, where Ukraine's missiles struck a Russian holiday village, and seven were killed, including three children.

Aside from this incident, this campaign has consequences that will impact ordinary Russians in the long term. Videos posted to social media of Russians reacting to petrol shortages or burning warehouses are often as full of bewilderment as they are of profanity. Those shooting the videos repeatedly ask themselves what is happening, and why. Ukraine needs those Russians to arrive at the answer, and to understand that it lies in their country's determination to wage a colonialist war of reconquest of its neighbour – and that the destruction will stop when Russia's aggression is stopped.

Despite Ukraine's renewed efforts, Putin seems steadfast in his commitment to prolonged pain for his enemy as well as his own country's people *(Sputnik)*

But while Ukraine's supporters may find proliferating videos of Russia in flames deeply satisfying, it will take far more to bring about a suspension of Russia's war, let alone a lasting peace.

No matter how much discontent may spread among Russia's population, it will take far more to convince those in the Kremlin that the benefits of the war outweigh its costs. Vladimir Putin has already publicly dismissed the warnings of senior bankers and economists that the war is subjecting Russia's economy to unsustainable strain, and throughout 2025 he repeatedly rejected the ceasefire terms forced on Ukraine by US president Donald Trump. For the time being, it seems Putin is still convinced that Russia has more to gain from continuing to destroy its people and its economy in an attempt to subjugate Ukraine than from freezing the conflict and pocketing its gains to date.

That means that convincing him otherwise will take still greater efforts from Ukraine's drone and missile designers, and continued political and economic support from its Western

coalition of backers to finish the job. The latest phase of the war is an encouraging one, but nobody should take it for granted that it is a shortcut to Russia ceasing its onslaught.

Back to top ⤒

On this day

John McCarthy, who spent more than five years in captivity in Lebanon, was released on this day in 1991 *(PA)*

117: Hadrian became emperor of Rome.

1609: Galileo Galilei presented his telescope to the Venetian Senate in Venice.

1786: US Congress unanimously chose the dollar as the monetary unit for the United States of America.

1834: The Poor Law Amendment Act was passed, abandoning the system of outdoor relief by which parishes looked after their poor and replacing it with the workhouse.

1876: Frank Richards, author and creator of schoolboy Billy Bunter, was born in London as Charles Hamilton.

1900: The first International Lawn Tennis Challenge (precursor to the Davis Cup) took place at Longwood Cricket Club in Massachusetts. The US beat the British Isles 3-0.

1914: Ernest Shackleton's ship *Endurance* left Plymouth on the final major expedition of the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration.

1929: German airship *Graf Zeppelin* began the first round-the-world flight by airship, departing from Lakehurst, New Jersey.

1942: General Bernard Montgomery was appointed commander of the British 8th Army at El Alamein.

1963: The Great Train Robbery took place at Sears Crossing, Buckinghamshire, when a gang of 15 men, including Ronnie Biggs and Buster Edwards, stole more than £2.6m.

1969: The Beatles were photographed by Iain MacMillan crossing the street as they walked away from EMI Recording Studios, for the cover of their *Abbey Road* album.

1974: Richard Nixon announced in a televised address that he would resign from office the following day due to his implication in the Watergate scandal.

1991: British journalist John McCarthy was released and flown home, five years after being kidnapped and held hostage in Beirut by the Islamic Jihad organisation.

1992: The original US "Dream Team" won the basketball gold at the Barcelona Olympics 117-85 over Croatia; the squad included superstars Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Scottie Pippen, Charles Barkley, and Patrick Ewing.

2006: Actor Sylvester Stallone and former heavyweight boxing contender Chuck Wepner settled a lawsuit out of court for an undisclosed sum; Wepner claimed he was the inspiration for the Rocky films.

2008: The opening ceremony of the Olympics took place in Beijing at the "Bird's Nest" Stadium.

2017: The Walt Disney Company announced plans to create its own streaming service, cancelling ties with Netflix.

On this day last year: Israel is "wrong" to approve plans to occupy Gaza City, prime minister Sir Keir Starmer said, and urged it to reconsider the new offensive, or it will "bring more bloodshed".

Birthdays

Dustin Hoffman, actor, 89; **Connie Stevens**, actor and singer, 88; **Keith Carradine**, actor, 77; **Nigel Mansell**, former racing driver, 73; **Chris Foreman**, pop-ska guitarist (Madness), 70; **The Edge** (**David Evans**), rock guitarist (U2), 65; **Angus Fraser**, former cricketer, 61; **Chris Eubank**, former boxer, 60; **Laura Kuenssberg**, journalist and BBC presenter, 50; **Roger Federer**, former tennis player, 45; **Princess Beatrice of York**, 38; Shawn Mendes, singer-songwriter, 28.

PA

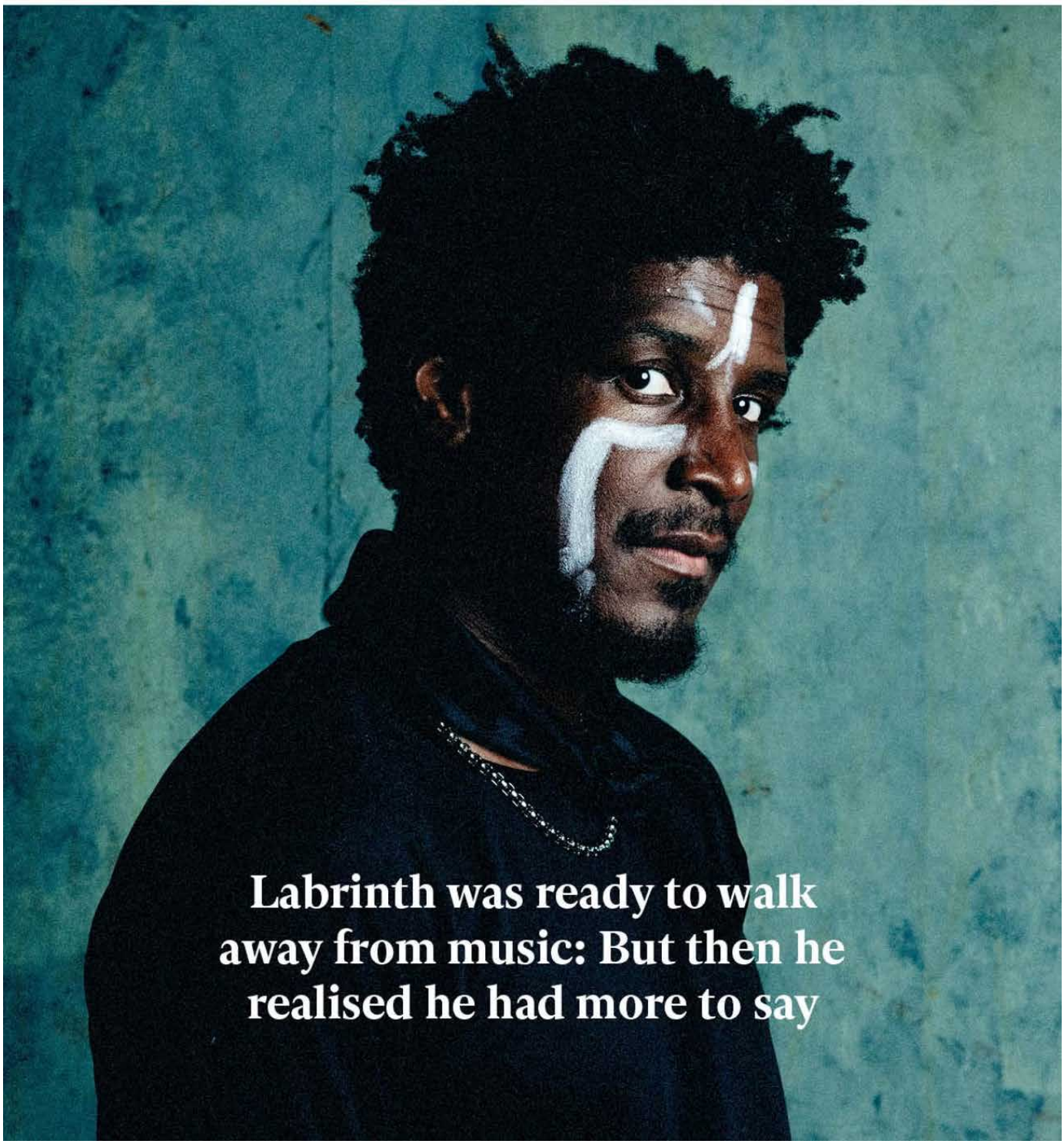
Back to top ⤒

INDEPENDENT

CULTURE

FROM COMMENT TO CELEBRITY PROFILES, WE EXPLORE THE WEEK IN ARTS

8 AUGUST 2026



Labrinth was ready to walk away from music: But then he realised he had more to say

‘I was gonna go sell coconuts and never talk of being an artist again’

Labrinth’s decision to walk away from scoring the third season of ‘Euphoria’ was a dramatic, near-career-ending statement by the producer and composer. But the Hackney-born hitmaker tells **Roisin O’Connor** he is back from the brink and excited to be making music on his terms

Labrinth: ‘I think I got tired of everything – that industry stuff, the way people approach doing business’ *(Press)*

Labrinth was the quiet man – the mastermind producer and songwriter behind an endless stream of hit records, films and critically acclaimed TV scores. He was the golden boy, a go-to for pop stars like The Weeknd, Beyoncé, Madonna, and Rihanna. He was *not* someone known for making trouble. So it was a shock, earlier this year, when he posted an expletive-laden, all-caps message on Instagram announcing he was walking away from the US teen drama series *Euphoria,* his record label, and the entire music industry. "FUCK COLUMBIA," he wrote. "DOUBLE FUCK *EUPHORIA*. IM OUT [sic]. THANK YOU AND GOOD NIGHT X."

That since-deleted post landed just a month before the much-delayed third and final season of *Euphoria.* The musician, real name Timothy McKenzie, had been enlisted by show creator Sam Levinson to score the first two seasons, then the third – only now Labrinth was to be joined by Oscar-winning composer Hans Zimmer. In early interviews, he seemed excited at the prospect, telling one journalist: "A lot of the compositions I've fallen in love with have been his, so it's weird that I get to even just be in the presence of this scoring god." But by April, he'd pulled his music from the show, and Zimmer received sole credit for the season three score.

If you'd been paying attention to Labrinth's solo album *Cosmic Opera Act I,* released at the beginning of this year, you might have noticed allusions to his discontent long before the Instagram post. On the dark, dramatic "Implosion", he observes in a menacing mutter: "And they mark us out of 10/ In a game we'll never win/ Chasing all this fame/ Till we meet our bitter end." What *could* he be talking about?

Labrinth laughs when I bring up those intriguing lyrics. "I was definitely in a transition period," the 37-year-old says. "I think every artist has been in that place where they're like, what the

hell is all this? As I'm getting older, too, I feel like everything you were conditioned to find important is actually kind of stupid." We're meeting at a smart cocktail bar in King's Cross. For a while, it seemed unlikely that this interview would happen – I was initially told that Labrinth was "done" talking about *Euphoria*, about all of it. But then he released another album, *Cosmic Opera Act II,* in May – four months after its predecessor – and it felt like he did, in fact, have more to say.

'It's more of an even playing field now, at least in the sense that artists are freer to release music how and when they want' *(Press)*

I would have understood if he were cagey from the beginning, given recent events. Instead, I find him to be relaxed, upbeat, and very funny. Labrinth was raised by gospel-loving parents in Hackney with his eight siblings; he's maintained his London cool despite flitting between here and the home he shares in LA with his wife and three children. Cool being the operative word: it's a heatwave day, but the fashion-forward Labrinth looks effortless in an all-black ensemble and tinted shades, like a chic scientist. He's excited at what he feels is a new era for the music industry, with fewer gatekeepers: "They were like, 'Play ball, bitch, follow these rules…' I think that doesn't exist in the same

way." Now, he thinks, it's more of an even playing field, at least in the sense that artists are freer to release music how and when they want.

Cosmic career: at the Met Gala in 2023 *(AFP/Getty)*

This was where *Cosmic Opera Act I* – his first solo album in three years – came in. He began writing it years ago, inspired by his love of *Star Wars* and composer John Barry, famed for his James Bond soundtracks: "I was always messing around with scoring, and I wanted to make a record solely on my laptop, by myself." Clearly, he had a lot to get off his chest. His disillusionment with the industry creeps into *Cosmic Opera*'s jittery, ominous sound, but it is also glaringly evident in the lyrics, which call back to when he first started, and where he finds himself now. His career took off in 2010 with Tinie Tempah's Brit Award-winning debut single "Pass Out", which he co-wrote and produced. He was then signed to Syco, the record label owned by reality TV svengali Simon Cowell. A string of chart hits followed, from his debut solo single "Let the Sun Shine" to further Tinie collaborations "Frisky" and "Earthquake".

"I've got mad respect for the guy," Labrinth says of Cowell. "The way he shows up [for artists] is very different to what people saw on TV. He's got foresight – he sees potential, even if it's something far from what he knows."

Cowell's gut instinct proved correct. Labrinth quickly became one of the most in-demand figures in the industry, writing songs on The Weeknd's Grammy-nominated breakthrough *Beauty Behind the Madness,* and an Oscar-nominated entry on the 2019 *Lion King* soundtrack. Early fans likely associate him with a throbbing, synth-heavy sound – the same one he brought to the *Euphoria* score – but he also excels in a fragile, piano-based vulnerability. His 2014 single "Jealous" was so moving that Adele used it to make her cry while shooting her "Hello" music video. "Snot going everywhere," she told one interviewer. "I can't cope with that song. You could play it at my kid's birthday and I'd burst into tears."

Labrinth performing with Zendaya at Coachella in 2023 *(Getty)*

Levinson clearly recognised his talents too, inviting him to score what would become a cultural phenomenon that made Labrinth an international star along with the show's cast – Zendaya, Sydney Sweeney, Hunter Schafer, Jacob Elordi. The show generated plenty of controversy for its depictions of drug use, nudity and violence, but it was praised for its acting and, of

course, the music. Labrinth won an Emmy for “All of Us”, featuring vocals from Zendaya, and brought her out to great fanfare at Coachella festival in 2023.

So where did it all go wrong? He knew the question was coming, but suddenly Labrinth falters, unsure of how much to say. “I think I got tired of everything – that industry stuff we were talking about, the way people approach doing business,” he says slowly. Working on season two was also a very different experience to season one: more money, more people, more pressure. “It’s just the way everything was handled wasn’t great for me, and I got frustrated with that because I’ve seen that in music and film,” he says. “Let’s be clear, when I work for someone, I work for *them*, so how they want to use the music doesn’t matter.” It’s everything outside the creative process that he dislikes: “Going to an awards ceremony and everyone’s either high or shit-faced, in their suit and tie, and they’re all drained.”

> ***We’re literally being pimped out by the same people supposed to [help] us***

At the time, he meant it when he said he was quitting: “For real like, I’m finished with this shit, I’m gonna go sell coconuts in the Caribbean and never talk of being an artist again,” he says. “But I think I was very angry [about the *Euphoria* situation], and my wife was like, ‘Babe, just take a minute’.” He praises her for reminding him about what really matters, asking him, “‘Why do you want to be bigger?’ Like, I don’t know, because loads of people told me I should want to be bigger?!”

He’s still with his record label, but he’s not spoken with Levinson since. Interviewed by *Rolling Stone,* the director said he “didn’t know” what had happened and praised Labrinth as “an incredible collaborator… who really built the foundation of

the sound of *Euphoria.”* But he added that he’d decided to take a different approach to the film’s soundtrack in season three.

Labrinth shrugs when I quote this back to him. “Everyone does their press run how they do it,” he says. “I’m not looking for anyone to validate what I’ve said. I’m not trying to cover anything up or save myself. I said what I said.”

‘I feel very focused on making something that feels meaningful to me’ *(Getty)*

There’s a song on *Cosmic Opera Act II* that I adore, “Bouncy Castles & Trampolines”, that expresses a yearning to get back to a more innocent time: “Whatever happened to being young and careless?/ Super Soakers and figurines/ Keep me young, please keep me dreaming.” On the same album, there’s “Prostitute”, containing the lyrics: “Money on the dresser/ I’m a prostitute/ No Vaseline/ This is how they do.” He giggles when I tell him that lyric made me shudder. His wife had the same reaction: “That’s how visceral it is, though, right?” he asks. “We’re literally being pimped out by the same people supposed to [help] us.”

He planned on taking a break, but there’s no way he can sit still for long. He keeps a Korg synthesiser next to his bed. “I keep

creating projects that I'm excited about, and there's the same old big shit – collaborations, whatever," he says. "I feel very focused on making something that feels meaningful to me." He still wants to see change in the industry, a world where artists make things and collaborate for the fun of it, not because they're trying to further their own careers. "We need to rewire the way artists even think about all of this," he says. "Everyone's thinking about how to turn themselves into a franchise or a legacy, turning their passion into a business. If you made no money off this, would you still want to do it? You need to ask every artist that question." But I don't need to ask Labrinth that. I already know the answer.

'Cosmic Opera Act II' is out now

Back to top ⤒

Culture / Theatre review

Outdoor revival of warped musical is a delight for those who are already fans

★★★☆☆

Regent's Park Open Air Theatre plays host to a well-performed new staging of 'Cats'

Alice Saville

Sami Fendall's updated costumes are a puzzling mixed bag: some performers look like they're meant to be animals, others look as if their leotards have been infested with rare bacterial cultures *(Photos Mark Senior)*

Like other peculiarly British creations such as chocolate concrete or Mr Blobby, the musical *Cats* only truly makes sense to people who grew up with it. I'm no superfan, but I can't hear the opening trumpets of "Mr Mistoffelees" without feeling pure joy and an urge to perform clumsy forward rolls (lingering Pavlovian programming from a year 4 gymnastics display). Director, choreographer and *Cats* obsessive Drew McOnie is so deeply in thrall to the show that he bunked off school, aged 17, to prance his way straight into the cast, spending hours dreaming up new moves after each performance.

His love shines off the new outdoor revival at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, which lacks a single big concept but is pleasantly whimsical enough to dispel memories of the 2019 film (a fiasco so disturbing that composer Andrew Lloyd Webber bought a therapy puppy to recover). Existing fans will be delighted to be reunited with their uncanny feline pals. Newcomers will find it more challenging to adjust to the plotless, witless world of the Jellicle tribe. (To them, I recommend a regimen of pre-show mindfulness exercises, repeating mantras like, "I surrender to silliness!" or "The cats can't hurt me!").

A giant bronze crescent moon dominates Sami Fendall's mellow, 1980s-inspired stage, setting the otherworldly tone for this show. The setup – not that it matters – is that we're watching a kind of all-cat song contest, each entrant trying to prove to their mystical leader, Old Deuteronomy, that they should ascend to pet heaven. McOnie's reimagined choreography heightens the sinister undertones of the scenes in this feline death cult's HQ by making the dancers collapse into artful cuddle puddles – clock-like circles, long conga lines – turning each cat into a single atom in a great cosmic scheme.

Then, individuals break out from the herd for their solo songs – each staged with a cabaret-style levity and distinctiveness. Jaydon Vijn performs "The Rum Tum Tugger" like he's

staggering out of a Camden rock pub, all snarling energy. Briana Craig and Danny Nattrass are a showstopping delight as criminal duo Rumpleteazer and Mungojerrie, cavorting with bags of loot in eerie synchronicity. Elliot Broadfoot is a huge amount of fun as greedy cat Bustopher Jones. And McOnie's masterstroke is casting the breakdancing Jet Yau as Mistoffelees – his moves are as blinding as his silver lamé getup, even though purists may be horrified by quite how un-catlike he looks.

Dianté Lodge's spiky Macavity is pure 21st-century nightmare fuel

McOnie clearly loves *Cats* but this production often doesn't feel very catty. Fendall's updated costumes are a puzzling mixed bag: some performers look like they're meant to be animals, others look as if their leotards have been infested with rare bacterial cultures. Their tails are disconcertingly long and rat-like. You wouldn't want to pet them, for fear of catching something.

Similarly, McOnie has treated some moments with more reverence than others. He's resurrected second-act pirate number "Growltiger's Last Stand", which is often cut from modern productions due to its offensively stereotyped Siamese cats (thankfully removed here). It's a highlight, full of old-school,

kid-thrilling, derring-do. But inexplicably, he's turned Macavity into pure 21st-century nightmare fuel, making him into a Krampus-esque spiked creation who looms with a flaming torch.

McOnie is all about the dancing, and exciting as the choreography often is here, he lacks the consistent vision to rein in this show's daftness and make it make sense for new generations. As it is, your ability to enjoy this show depends on your tolerance for watching performers prance about in unitards, intoning absolute nonsense as though they're imparting the deepest secrets of the universe. Things work better in the second act, after the sun sets – this musical is the kind of warped affair that should be conducted under the cover of darkness, and I mean that with the greatest of affection.

Until 19 September, then touring until June 2027

Back to top ⤒

Breathtaking lakeside views – and a soprano at the peak of her powers

Two musically triumphant productions dominate the opening days of the gorgeous Savonlinna opera festival, writes **Simon Mundy**, which is still going strong after more than 100 years

In Norma the title role was sung for the first time in her career by Lisette Oropesa *(Jussi Silvennoinen)*

Even the Finns have to journey with purpose to get to the Savonlinna Opera Festival, which has been going strong for well over 100 years. There are Londoners who think that the trip down to East Sussex to Glyndebourne is a major outing, but Savonlinna requires a four-hour train journey northeast from Helsinki: an intercity train followed by one of those two-carriage local things that trundle for the final leg through forests of pine and birch, with the occasional glimpse of lakes.

On the way, the rails run parallel to the Russian border, at one point coming within a few hundred metres. That border is closed now, of course, and the festival no longer has the old influx of visitors from St Petersburg. They have been replaced by the British, Danes and Americans.

When the trees clear and Savonlinna appears, the view is breathtaking. Its 15th-century castle dominates the lake, Finland's largest. In the courtyard, covered for the season, opera plays to an audience of over 2000 for a month (this year 17 July to 9 August, in 2027 from 3 to 31 July). The programme is a mixture of the festival's own productions, co-productions and each year a guest company from around the world. This year the guest was the company from the other end of the Baltic in Gothenburg.

The ensemble, orchestra and chorus proved to be among the finest. The performances they gave of Verdi's *La Traviata* and Bellini's *Norma* were not remnants of last season, but previews of next, and Swedish audiences are in for a treat when the trucks arrive home. Both were musically triumphant. In *Norma* the title role was sung for the first time in her career by Lisette Oropesa. It requires a soprano at the peak of her powers and believable as a high priestess and young mother at the same time. So, at 42, Oropesa is perfect. This is one of the most vocally challenging roles in opera, but Oropesa has the range and agility to make those demands sound an entirely natural consequence of the libretto.

The city of Savonlinna in Finland *(Supplied)*

She did not monopolise the singing honours though. Ann-Kristin Jones (fully Swedish despite the Welsh-looking surname) was Oropesa's equal, singing Adalgisa, the younger priestess who unwittingly becomes her rival in loving their enemy Roman ruler. Jones is far less famous than she should be. Hers is a voice of power, blending with Oropesa's with beauty in their duets. This was one of those rare evenings in opera when there were no weak links in the cast or orchestra. The stone walls of the castle act as natural amplifiers so the sound is huge.

Norma was acted but not staged at Savonlinna, unlike *La Traviata* the previous evening, which turned out to be a bonus. Acting Violetta in the Verdi was Venera Gimadieva, the same age as Oropesa but not singing the main role for anything like the first time. She is something of a specialist, having sung it first at Savonlinna in 2013, the next year at Glyndebourne, and in 2015 at Covent Garden. Not surprisingly she glides through the arias and knows just how to bring the audience's focus on to her fatal struggle against consumption, whatever the frenzy around her. This was no easy task here, with director Silvia Paoli unable to

resist cluttering the stage with unnecessary business: furniture movers wearing rabbit heads; chorus members inventing endless distractions; some particularly disruptive lighting. Luckily Gimadieva's brilliance shone through and was matched by Yngve Søberg as the misguided and destructive Germont father, his magnificent baritone voice more often to be heard at Norwegian National opera.

The lure of Savonlinna is as much about the castle and its setting as the quality of the music. The first is unchanging and when the music-making is as fine as this, the experience is properly overwhelming. And then, after *Norma*, strolling back from the castle as the sun went down behind us at midnight and the full moon rose over the lake to the east, the fireworks crashed into the sky to mark Savonlinna's 385th birthday as a city.

Back to top ⤒

Saturday quiz

Chris Maume presents his weekly general knowledge quiz

1. Who are the above, and what job have they all played on screen?

2. Which team is missing from this list? Cleveland Cavaliers (2003-10), Miami Heat (2010-14), Cleveland Cavaliers (2014-18), Los Angeles Lakers (2018-26).

3. What did Isambard Kingdom Brunel refer to as “My first child, my darling”?

4. In 1983, in which British museum did Europe’s first permanent IMAX cinema open?

5. Fetih Day, celebrated in Turkey on 29 May, celebrates which military victory?

6. On this day in 1945, the UK, US, USSR and France signed the Treaty of London, which set out procedures for which process?

7. Which notable event took place at Ledburn, near Mentmore in Buckinghamshire, on this day in 1963?

8. What is “chest-fairing”?

9. What distinguishes the songs “I Have Confidence” and “Something Good” in the film The Sound of Music from the other songs?

10. In June 1949, how did Albert II, a rhesus macaque monkey, make history?

Show answers

1. They have all played editors or editors-in-chief of newspapers or magazines. Clockwise from top left, Tom Basden played Matt Braden, editor of the Tambury Gazette, in After Life; Candice Bergen played Enid Frick (Vogue) in Sex and the City and Just Like That...; Kathy Burke played Magda (several magazines, including Ella) in Absolutely Fabulous and Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie; Cary Grant played Walter Burns (The Morning Post) in His Girl Friday; Bill Murray played Arthur Howitzer Jnr (the French Dispatch) in the "Obituary" section of The French Dispatch; Meryl Streep played Miranda Priestly (Runway) in The Devil Wears Prada and The Devil Wears Prada 2.

2. The Philadelphia 76ers; the 41-year-old basketball star LeBron James recently made the surprise announcement that he was joining the 76ers for what would be his final contract in the NBA.

3. The Clifton Suspension Bridge. He won the competition to design the Bridge aged 24 but died in 1859 before it was completed; John Hawkshaw and William Henry Barlow completed the design, and the Bridge opened in 1864.

4. At the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford; it is now known as the National Science and Media Museum.

5. Fetih Day is held to celebrate the Ottoman capture of Constantinople in 1453. "Fetih" is the Turkish and Arabic word for "conquest"

6. The Nuremberg trials, which began the following November.

7. The Great Train Robbery, in which £2.61m, worth about £65m today, was stolen from a Royal Mail train at Bridego Railway Bridge.

8. The practice in cycling of putting objects such as water bottles down the front of the cyclist's kit in order to improve airflow and reduce wind resistance. Riders in the Tour de France Femmes currently taking place have been examined for illegal aerodynamic enhancements.

9. They were written specifically for the film and had not appeared in the stage musical. They replaced the songs "An Ordinary Couple" (which was replaced by "Something Good"), "How Can Love Survive?" and "No Way to Stop It".

10. He became the first mammal in space. He flew from Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico, achieving an altitude of 83 miles on board a V-2 rocket captured from Germany during the Second World War. He died on returning to Earth when the vessel's parachute failed, killing him on impact.

Back to top